THE HEART OF US

T. R. SULLIVAN

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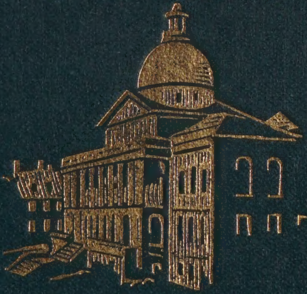

T. R. SULLIVAN

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By T. R. Sullivan

THE HEART OF US.
LANDS OF SUMMER. Illustrated.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston and New York

THE HEART OF US

THE HEART OF US

A Novel

BY

T. R. SULLIVAN

Potentissimus est, qui se habet in potestate.
SENECA.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
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1912

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TO MY COUSIN

FRANCIS BLAKE

"IN MEMORY OF DEAR OLD TIMES"

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THE HEART OF US

I

THE TARANTULA

"If Bradish tells you that there 's no money in it," said the elder of the two men, as the club door closed behind them and they came out together into the autumn night, "then, my dear Ives, unquestionably he 's right. No shrewder man at his own game in Boston — perhaps in all the country — than Barney Bradish!"

"Of course, I fully understand that, Kelton. The play is a half-hour affair in one act, — a mere curtain-raiser, with little if any commercial value here, at least; but Bradish, shrewd manager as he is, has his amiable weaknesses. He saw the play in Paris, and happened to like it. In translating it for him I had no idea of making money."

Kelton raised his eyebrows and turned upon his young friend a fleeting glance of mild surprise. "Why, in Heaven's name, did you translate it, then?" said he.

"Well, as a matter of recreation, — to turn my hand to light amusement after business hours. I have always had a weakness for the theatre, you see; an amiable weakness, like one of Bradish's."

"Dilettante!" Kelton muttered. "Ah, well, if that 's all, if you are going in with your eyes open —"

"Wide open!" explained Ives, with eager emphasis. "And, so far as production goes, if I gain nothing, I risk nothing. I am a humble blank in the announcements, — an anonymous gentleman, a small unknown."

Kelton growled a rejoinder which was inarticulate, — simply a tone of general disapproval. They walked on for some time in silence through the quiet, dimly-lighted street.

"What an old bear you are!" Ives thought, more amused than irritated.

Kelton broke in upon his reverie with an abrupt question.

"What 's the cast?" he inquired.

"Not so bad! There are only five parts, with Jarvis leading. A character study, quite in his line."

"Jarvis, eh? Well, Bradish must like it. And Jarvis? How about him?"

"Ah, that I don't know."

"Don't know!" Kelton repeated. "Haven't you seen him rehearse?"

"No. What was the use? I should only be in the way."

Another growl; and another long silence, which Kelton broke sharply, as before.

"You know him, don't you?"

"Jarvis? No; only from the front, as they say in the theatre. I wish I did know him; perhaps I shall, some day."

"Why not to-morrow, Sunday? I am going to drop in quietly for dinner with him at his lodgings, and I'll take you with me. There will be no one else."

"But—" objected Ives, startled and pleased.

"There need be no 'but' about it. If you are free, I'll take you. You will come?"

"I only thought he might not care to see me so intimately, — a perfect stranger."

"Bah! *Il en a vu tant d'autres!* Don't be uneasy. I accept the responsibilities. Besides, you are no stranger now, but something quite in his line, like the part you have fished up for him from unfailing Parisian sources. He will want to see you."

"If you think that, I will go under your wing gladly. A thousand thanks!"

"Good. He dines at seven, and lives at the back of the hill in Number Six, Gibbon Place, you know, — Kitty Colt's. Meet me at the club, and we'll walk up — and down — together. No full dress!"

"Agreed. I'll be there. Thank you again."

"For nothing! Here's my way. Good-night!" And Kelton, as if to escape further acknowledgment, hurried off into the darkness.

Ives went his own way deliberately. "Devilish good of Kelton to do an unexpected thing like that!" said he. "When all the rest goes to prove that he does n't care for anybody, or believe in anything. Queer old skeptic! I wonder whether I shall be just such another, when I am forty-five."

There was time to kill before that could be determined; for at the moment the years of Staunton Ives were barely twenty-seven. In glowing health, regular in habits for one of city life, he looked even younger. He was strong, erect, well-formed, with a kind of distinction that had proved difficult to analyze; since if not ill-looking, neither was he handsome, and he possessed no salient feature. He had brown hair, brown eyes, a small, brown mustache, a brown complexion; and his clothes often bore the same prevailing tint. His unobtrusive qualities, however, were those of good-breeding, not awkwardness. Intimate friends declared that he was a man of reserved force, which would come to the surface some day. But this was not the general impression. "All in half-tones," Mrs. Stephen Middlecot, who liked to have her good things repeated, had lately said of him; and the phrase passed current now at every mention of his name.

Ives was an only son, an only surviving child. His mother and father, both of good serviceable tradition in their small world, had passed beyond the need of that; and the latter, dying while the boy was still in college, left him comfortably off, though by no means rich. Nevertheless, after graduation, he was able to extend his knowledge by the year in Europe upon which he had always counted. Then, returning to his native city with no definite purpose, he was suddenly offered a subordinate position in the banking-house of Ashley and Company whose legal adviser his father had been. This he accepted, somewhat doubtfully; but the wisdom of his course seemed clear, from the fact that he had gained ground steadily in the succeeding years. His position was now an honorable one, of trust; and he often reminded himself with satisfaction that this was just the sort of career, safe, serviceable, traditional, which his father would have approved.

On the following evening when Ives reached the club at the appointed hour, he found Kelton in one of the lower rooms studying a newspaper, with his hat and overcoat on, ready for departure. The paper was tossed aside upon the instant, and they set forth without delay.

"I see that 'Love-in-Idleness' is booked for to-morrow night at the Temple Theatre," Kelton soon remarked, "to introduce the new English comedy which has made a hit in London. A remarkable bill, they call it, with Jarvis in both pieces. You 're in luck, my boy. That ought to run."

"I hope so," returned Ives. He had read every word of a street poster the night before, and had compared all newspaper advertisements early in the day, but there was no need of saying that.

"How did Barnicoat Bradish happen to offer you the work?" pursued Kelton.

"The suggestion came from me. I met Bradish some time ago, abroad, and we have kept up the acquaintance. He spoke one day of wanting the translation. I volunteered my services. After due consideration, he accepted them."

"Ah! Well, he might have done worse, I suppose."

"Thanks!" said Ives, laughing.

Kelton's reply was unintelligible. They had begun to climb the hill, and their talk soon confined itself to monosyllables; until, as they descended a retired street upon the north side with echoing footfalls, breath and conversation came more freely.

"Dismal quarter, this!" said Kelton, turning his sharp, black eyes right and left toward the house-fronts, after one or two cheerful sighs indicating that the change was acceptable. He was a small, thin thread-paper of a man to whom a mountain-peak should have been nothing; but he had, long since, lost the habit of exertion, thanks to an income ample for the requirements of his bachelorship.

"Yes. It 'moults the firstling plumes,'" Ives quoted; "yet it has character."

"Good, bad, indifferent!" agreed Kelton. "The last chiefly, — inclining to the second, and bound to get there; but Gibbon Place is better. It 's an oasis."

"Tell me about Number Six, — the house and the household," said Ives, upon whom the old nervous dread of an introduction which resembled an intrusion began once more to settle down. "Who are they all, and what are they like?"

"To be sure, it 's quite new to you, is n't it? Well, the 'all' just at present, so far as I know, are but two, — Adam Jarvis and his landlady. Jarvis you 've seen; Kitty Colt is a retired soubrette, locally famous forty years ago. She lost her voice, I believe, and she is very diminutive; so, through one cause or another, she has been, for a generation at least, off the stage, though always hovering near it in her actors' lodging-house. Shining lights of the profession come and go there, according to engagements; but Jarvis is the only permanent lodger, and the other favored ones are few. Miss Colt demands credentials of good conduct, I am told. She must be sixty now, and is fastidious to a fault. A type! You 'll see! And the house, you 'll see that, too. It has character, I suppose, as you say. The third from the end on the left, — there you are!"

They turned the corner as he spoke, into a short, connecting link, running east and west between two thoroughfares. It was private property, privileged to obstruct the passage of vehicles by the wooden bar that stretched across, midway, from granite posts at either curb. No shops had yet intruded there. The square brick houses, if not handsome, were of a solidity that denoted respectable age and comfort; some stood back a little, behind railed grass-plots, from one of which an old horse-chestnut tree stretched sturdy limbs over the sidewalk, strewing it with dead leaves. These were permitted to remain until the wind whirled them away. A small neglect, that was characteristic! For Gibbon Place had seen better days, and its time-honored look turned toward rustiness. Over all hung a gentle, melancholy air, prophetic of change, near at hand, inevitable.

The house was built out to the sidewalk, with but one low stone step between that and its threshold. The glass door-plate of an earlier fashion displayed the name K. COLT in clear, black letters. A maid, not only very trim but also very pretty, as Ives noticed, admitted the two men into a square hall, low-studded and sombrely furnished. The table, chairs, and dingy mirror-frame were of a heavy, late-colonial pattern. On their right was the staircase; on the left were two paneled doors with brass latches. Through one of these the maid vanished without speaking; and at the same instant the other flew open before Miss Colt, herself, who advanced to meet them, with a hearty greeting for Kelton, a cordial smile and welcoming grasp of the hand for his friend.

She was so small as to seem almost fairy-like in her proportions to the friend's alert fancy; blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, of sprightly wit and rippling laughter. Her gray hair was half hidden by a lace cap with fluttering pink ribbons. The old black silk she wore upon this and other state occasions, quaintly cut and barely touching the ground, appeared to be of no fashion, but a law unto itself. It was fastened at the throat by a huge cameo, — the man's white profile, that may or may not have been a family portrait, standing out in high relief against the orange-hued lining of a shell. And over her shoulders hung a thin, white shawl which, continually slipping off, was continually recovered in a hitching gesture that seemed the natural result of irrepressible vivacity. In her waking hours, indeed, she was never at rest. Even in youth she could have had but a small share of beauty's fatal gift. Her eyes were too small, her mouth was too large, her nose too long; but the inward light of good-humored drollery illuminated her face and made its odd combination of features more than pleasing. The soul of a merry-andrew that lurked behind it could hardly have desired better expression.

"Come right in!" she urged. "Mr. Jarvis will be down directly. Take care of the step, Mr. Ives!"

They followed her to the lower level of the room on the left, — parlor, dining, and reception room in one. It was long, wide, and low; two square windows, deeply recessed, with cushioned seats beneath, looked upon the street; a hard-coal fire glowed in the grate at the farther end; and in the middle of the room, under a drop-light, stood the dining-table, set for four.

Through an open door opposite the windows, Ives saw a corner of the kitchen with its brick oven and other antiquated appliances. While Miss Colt hurried forward to close the door, the newcomer looked curiously at the walls, where hung old engravings, chiefly theatrical in subject: Macbeth and the witches; Prince Henry and his sleeping father; the elder Booth as Richard, — in one comprehensive glance Ives distinguished these. Then the hostess, turning back, begged them to sit down and be comfortable; and they were hardly settled in their places when the hall-door opened, admitting Adam Jarvis.

He was a tall, large man, well-proportioned, robust and little past his prime, which in a comedian comes late; though the brown wig, tightly curled, that he had worn in private life since early youth, made him look older than his actual sum of years. He had mild, gray eyes, and the actor's pallor of complexion. The eyes were friendly, however; while the colorless features, not handsome yet finely cast, in action triumphantly mobile, were in repose dignified and benevolent. Far from self-assertive, slow of speech and movement, reserved among strangers to the verge of shyness, he sometimes awed a chance acquaintance into silence; but once known was well known, with him. Then, his good-humored wit often took the lead; and time proved him the most genial, appreciative, and courteous of friends. Courtesy, indeed, clung to him like a garment. He bore the hall-mark of his own unrivaled Sir Peter Teazle everywhere, — the perfect type and exponent of a high-bred gentleman.

He forestalled introduction unceremoniously. "Glad you did n't disappoint us, Mr. Ives," he said, shaking hands warmly. "Mr. Kelton said he should try to bring you." And after a look at the table, he went on: "Miss Colt took him at his word, as you see. Try the armchair, please. So you are giving us a piece at the Temple; very good piece it is, too!"

"I wish the good in it were really mine, and not the Frenchman's," stammered Ives, with rising color.

Then, while the veteran smiled approval of the honest disclaimer, Kelton came to his relief. "Ives takes his goods where he finds them, — like Molière!" said he; "but the end is not yet. Mr. Ives has been bitten by the tarantula."

"Ah, well! The bite rarely proves fatal, I believe," returned the actor, lightly. "And the future must take care of itself. We have our present troubles to deal with now. You have not followed rehearsals, have you?" he added, turning to Ives again. "Did you see the play in Paris?"

"Once only, long ago, — unprofessionally, so to speak. Bradish saw it last spring with the eye of a manager."

"Yes, he has given us the points. Another time, look after them too, yourself. Nothing like the fresh eye, you know. I hope I dress the part correctly. You 'll see to-morrow; if there's anything wrong, be sure to send me word."

Miss Colt, who had been bustling about to and from the kitchen-door, now announced dinner. Adam Jarvis, taking the head of the table with his back to the fire, drew out the chair on his left for Ives, and motioned Kelton to the seat at the other end opposite his own. Then, to the infinite astonishment of Ives, the actor moved into the vacant place on his right an old-fashioned piano-stool; and when the top had been screwed up to the requisite height, Miss Colt proceeded to perch herself upon it. "I 'm so very short, you see," she explained with a kind of apologetic chuckle; "I always eat off a piano-stool."

The others accepted her speech and action gravely, as a matter of course; but the unexpected incident so overcame Ives, that to restrain a rude outburst of laughter, he began to absorb his soup with undue haste. There was more talk of the play, and in listening he gradually recovered his composure. Miss Colt tinkled a bell which summoned the maid to take away their plates. While she was thus employed, Mr. Jarvis made an involuntary exclamation that he immediately sought to smother; but Ives, turning quickly at the sound, caught a sportive exchange of glances between him and Miss Colt. Their eyes twinkled in merriment. There was some hidden joke, not to be revealed evidently; for Mr. Jarvis, forcing solemnity, filled Ives's sherry-glass, and bade him pass the decanter on to Kelton, who, judging by his unconsciousness, had no knowledge of the mirth-provoking cause and seemed to have missed its effect. A moment later, Miss Colt, slipping silently from her perch, went out into the kitchen, whence she returned in a moment bearing before her a leg of mutton roasted to perfection. She set the platter down with a triumphant air in front of Mr. Jarvis, and said as she resumed her place: —

"Mr. Ives will excuse informalities, I hope. Our maid is ill, and her understudy is — well, a little timid."

"Oh, Mr. Ives won't mind, I dare say," said the actor, rising to carve the joint.

"Not a bit of it!" confirmed Ives, promptly. "When one is so gifted with good looks, you see — " Here the maid came in again, and he stopped short, looking at his hostess helplessly. Both she and Mr. Jarvis laughed outright at this; then all three laughed together.

"What's the joke?" Kelton inquired.

"Mr. Ives is amused at my ways, that's all!" said Miss Colt, recovering herself.

"He must behave better, then," rejoined Kelton. "I am responsible for him."

"Give him time, — and he'll come round!" she laughed, diving for her shawl, which had slipped under the table. "We understand each other perfectly, — don't we, Mr. Ives?"

"Perfectly," Ives repeated; though he felt sure, even then, that there was in the joke something more than he comprehended. And, before long, he became equally sure that this imaginary quantity referred in some way to the maïd's "understudy," as Miss Colt had called her. Any suggestion of her presence contributed to the quiet or covertly mischievous amusement of Mr. Jarvis.

"Don't forget the jelly, Susan!" whispered the landlady over her shoulder.

"So Susan is her name," remarked the lodger-in-chief, as the girl went out.

"No. It's Matilda!" was the sharp retort; "but I can't bother about their names. They are Susan, all of them, to me."

"Oh!" said Mr. Jarvis, meekly, with features distorted by an inward convulsion.

Miss Colt paid further visits to the kitchen during the course of the dinner, which, otherwise, proceeded smoothly enough; the new attendant, so far as Ives could judge, performing her simple duties quickly and well; but he hardly looked her way, lest she should find in his curiosity cause for embarrassment. The somewhat eccentric unconventionality of the household had for him a freshness that was delightful. He enjoyed it all exceedingly. Kelton, observing this, took pains to draw Mr. Jarvis out. The old comedian related sundry bits of his professional experience, with illustrative comment by the way which showed close study of human nature and a gift for its artistic application. Clearly, he found the listener sympathetic. As for the flighty hostess, Ives won her heart by small attentions, such as the adjustment of her movable pedestal and the rescue of her trailing garment; agreeable young men, of well-developed social instincts, did not often come her way, and she took kindly to these acts of courtesy.

At the dinner's end, when the guests had lighted cigars, Mr. Jarvis produced a brier-wood pipe, and established himself with it in an armchair by the fire, — plainly, his habitual place. Kelton took another chair at the opposite end of the hearthstone. The piano-stool was moved away; and Miss Colt asked Ives to sit beside her on a high-backed sofa against the long wall, opposite the windows. The sofa was well-stuffed and deep, — too deep for her; but she made the odds even by a swift disposal of cushions behind her back and on the floor at her feet. There came a lull in conversation, while the maid cleared the table; during which interim, Ives had a better opportunity than before, to look at the girl, whom he summed up mentally as uncommonly pretty. She replaced the white cloth with a dark one ; bending over this and smoothing out its folds under the light, in an attitude which seemed to him graceful, — better still, unconsciously so. When she moved noiselessly away, his eyes followed her. The door closed, diverting the look and its accompanying thought to the print of Booth's Richard on the wall, near by. He spoke of that, with a wish that he might have come into the world early enough to see the famous actor in his most famous rôle.

Mr. Jarvis had seen Booth several times ; Kelton, once ; and the two began to compare reminiscences of that remarkable performance, while Ives listened enviously. Then Miss Colt, who never could keep still very long, brought him a framed photograph of the younger Booth, displaying proudly its autograph and dedication to her.

"Ned's last picture!" she explained. "Is n't it good of him? We call him 'Ned,' you know, Mr. Jarvis and I. He is just a boy to us. He often comes here to stay, when he plays an engagement in town. Mr. Jarvis, let me bring down some of your scrap-books! I know that Mr. Ives will enjoy them." Mr. Jarvis expressed the fear of boring their guest with too much "shop" ; but at a reassuring word, the alert little hostess whisked out of the room, to whisk back again in a few moments with three worn volumes, which she laid upon the table. Then, after moving a chair for Ives into a favorable light, she took her old place in the sofa-corner among the cushions.

The scrap-books, filled with prints, programmes, autograph letters, and other fugitive theatrical matter, covered more than a lifetime. For there had been an elder Jarvis, as it appeared, whose collections of long ago were here included. Ives turned the yellow pages with ever-increasing interest, lingering over the portrait of some actor, dead and gone, who had been to him but a name; silently inspecting it, or by a leading question drawing on the others to further reminiscence. From a likeness of John Kemble, as "Penruddock," he glanced up to ask in what play that unfamiliar part might be found.

"'The Wheel of Fortune,'" replied Miss Colt, promptly; "to think you should not know! We used to do that often, did n't we, Mr. Jarvis?"

"Oh, yes. Cumberland's comedy, I think, — eighteenth century, once very popular; but, bless my soul, I have n't heard its name these twenty years!"

"Twenty years, — 'come Lammas-eve at night,' as the Nurse says," resumed Miss Colt, gayly. "Dear, dear! How old we are, Mr. Jarvis, — or how young Mr. Ives is!"

Just then, in the hall, came a slight movement, a murmur of voices; and Miss Colt, kicking away her supports, darted to the door, which, presently, she opened wide.

"Goff Canterbury!" she announced; "and Chilworth! Come in, Goff! Come right in, Mr. Ballister! Glad to see you. It 's only Mr. Kelton, — you know *him*, — and Mr. Ives."

There entered in response an old man and a young one, who immediately impressed Ives as interesting types of character, so different that extremes seemed to meet in their companionship. The elder of the two, Mr. Canterbury, was tall, spare, and bony, with thin gray hair that needed brushing. His rusty, black coat, prodigiously long, displayed many an angle of his gaunt frame; and its sombre effect was heightened by a black silk stock, clumsily wound about the pointed shirt-collar which partially concealed his chin. The face, shaven, though none too closely, looked mild and amiable; but it had no distinctive feature. The eyes, small and deep-set, in a strong light blinked continually. This peculiarity, emphasized by a weak voice and some hesitation of manner, gave the whole figure an air of timidity, as if it were little in touch with the world. His odd mixture of comedy and pathos somehow suggested to Ives a divinity student, grown old before graduation. Then he noticed the man's remarkable hands, which were very white and slender, delicate as a woman's; and he began to wonder what their employment could be.

The other was a dapper little fellow of thirty, cocksure of himself, too conspicuously dressed, with an air of fashion going to seed. His showy attire would, certainly, have looked worn by daylight.

As the visitors settled down by the fire after saluting him formally, Ives turned upon the hostess an inquiring glance.

"That 's Chilworth!" she whispered, in reply to it;

"of the 'New York Patriarch' and the 'Washington Planet.' He sends each of 'em a weekly letter, you know. His real name's Ballister, — Dick Ballister. Mr. Canterbury is a neighbor of ours, two doors off. He makes globes, — good ones, too. I've heard Mr. Jarvis say they were the best in the world."

"Ah!" said Ives, studying Mr. Canterbury's face with deeper interest. Then these two turned back to the scrap-books, while the talk at the fireplace went on.

"I found Dick on the doorstep," the globe-maker was explaining in his deliberate way; "coming in for information about to-morrow, and — "

"Yes, yes," broke in the correspondent's resonant tone abruptly. "I know all about the English piece, of course, — know how you'll do it, too; but what's the other?"

"Something from the other side of the channel, given there at the Français"; and Mr. Jarvis added the title in French, with admirable accent, as Ives observed.

"Oh, that's it! Who cooked it up for Bradish?"

"A gentleman of Boston," replied the actor, with an all but imperceptible wink to Ives; "anonymous, I believe."

"Ah!" said the great Chilworth, drawing a long breath. "Amateur work!"

"Yes," interposed Kelton, with a smile; "but the Hub of the Universe always encourages rising talent, Mr. Ballister."

"Is that so?" Mr. Ballister responded. "Well, I'll encourage him! By the way," he went on, "did you happen to see my adaptation of 'Mademoiselle de Belle Isle' in Washington, last season?"

"No," said Kelton; "had n't the pleasure. How did it go?"

"Wonderfully. And the difficulties were enormous. I had to make very important changes. They thought, over there, my third act an advance upon the original French. They'll do it in New York, some day; then, you'll see."

"I hope so!" returned Kelton, dryly. "I did n't know you went in for theatrical authorship."

"Oh, yes. You see I have had a good deal of stage experience, first and last, — been on the boards, too, myself. I played Rosencrantz in London once to Fechter's Hamlet."

"Indeed!" Kelton murmured in a reverential tone, a shade too solemn for sincerity.

"Fact! Rosencrantz, mind you! You would n't believe it, I suppose, but there's a devil of a difference between him and Guildenstern. It's a bit subtle, but I discovered it by careful study. Shakespeare meant to draw the line. He knew what he was about, — pretty much always, don't you see? I sat up nights, and played the part for all it was worth. I made the distinction. Now, I dare say that Mr. Jarvis, himself, never observed there was one."

"I can't say I have," that authority admitted. "You see, I was never cast for Rosencrantz or Guildenstern."

"That's a pity!" said Mr. Ballister, rising to button his coat about him. "Well, I have a great deal on hand, and must be going. Good luck to the show, to-morrow! I shall try to see the performance. I 'll mention it, anyway."

"Thanks!" rejoined Mr. Jarvis. "Do your duty by us, like a man!"

"You bet! Good-night to you; good-night, Miss Colt; good-night, everybody!" And, as though the newspapers which he served would be wrecked by a moment's procrastination, Mr. Ballister hurried away.

"Clever youth!" muttered Kelton, when the door had closed behind him. "'Advancing' upon Dumas!"

"The tarantula!" said Mr. Jarvis, with a smile.

"Comforting, too!" Kelton added. "Shakespeare knew what he was about, pretty much always, did n't he?"

"Rosencrantz!" pursued Mr. Jarvis, reflectively. "And Guildenstern! Holloa, Goff, you 're not going, too?"

"Yes," declared Mr. Canterbury, casting about the room a look of perplexity. "I only came in for a minute. You see, I thought —"

"Come now, Goff!" said Mr. Jarvis, hastily. "You had no business to think at all, as Miss Colt will tell you."

"No, you had n't!" confirmed the lady, with fluttering earnestness. "And you must n't, either!"

Mr. Canterbury glanced from one to the other in confusion. "But, — I understood —" he began.

"Oh, if you came for the package," said Miss Colt, sharply, "that 's in the kitchen. This way, I 'll get it for you; and you can go out by the back gate."

"Ah!" said Mr. Canterbury, more puzzled than ever. "Well, good-night, Adam; Mr. Kelton, good-night! Mr. —"

"Ives!" said that gentleman, helping him out.

"Mr. Ives, yes. It 's a pleasure to have seen you, Mr. Ives,— a great pleasure!" Then, in a pitiful state of embarrassment, he was hustled off into the kitchen, whither Miss Colt followed him.

For some time longer the talk by the fire went on, to the keen enjoyment of Ives, upon whom the veteran actor's personality had cast a kind of spell. The man was absorbed in an art of limited range, but within its limits he was master. Shrewd and kindly too, he had learned to qualify his natural quickness of perception by a wise restraint. His humor bore no trace of bitterness. Ives, listening, longed to know him better; at the moment of parting, he wished him success on the morrow, explaining that the wish was superfluous, since a triumph must be already assured; but the old war-horse shook his head.

"Ah!" he sighed; "we can't tell who is governor until after election!"

Then, giving his hand warmly, Mr. Jarvis urged his new friend to come again. Miss Colt, who appeared upon the scene opportunely, repeated the invitation. All had gone well, and the evening was one to be remembered. Ives expressed his delight to Kelton on the way home.

"Very glad that you enjoyed it," was the answer.

"What could that joke have been?" Ives wondered. "About the understudy?"

"Joke?" repeated Kelton, indifferently. "Ah! Was there one?"

II

SIDE-LIGHTS

In confiding to Humphrey Kelton his share in the forthcoming production at the Temple Theatre, Ives had reckoned upon no more sympathy than he found; nor, indeed, upon so much as was developed, if the expedition to Gibbon Place could be called a sympathetic move on Kelton's part, — as it might well have been had any one else engendered the scheme. Ives fancied that he knew Kelton thoroughly, — there was a kind of security in the man's equable impassiveness, — and the confidence resulted from an after-dinner impulse to speak of what engrossed his mind as the two sat over their coffee alone. That Kelton would attend the performance certainly never occurred to him; and, probably, nothing was further from Kelton's own thought at the time.

Humphrey Kelton had a wide acquaintance, few friends. His daily life, long circumscribed by his clubs, threatened to become limited strictly to his own comfort in them. Of public spirit he showed no sign, and even his small personal enthusiasms were dying out, one by one. He had once cared much for books, with which his capacious rooms, where no one ever came, were still lined. Then, shifting from matter to form, he had collected rare editions. That taste declined, the collection was dispersed, and he began to fill its place with costly engravings. When his interest in these had languished, he entered upon an exhaustive study of the stage, past and present, spending all his evenings at the theatre and seeking the society of actors. It was during this phase of his progress that he formed an acquaintance with Adam Jarvis, outlasting the fervid zeal through which it had come to pass. For the theatrical interest already waned, in its turn. He had decided that all plays were too long, their conventions too patent for a sensible man's endurance. Nowadays, he seldom went to the theatre, rarely stayed it through to the bitter end. His way of life approached the sear, the yellow leaf, in a growing tendency to distinguish himself at nightly philosophic discussion of the cynical sort by the club-fire; or, failing that, to doze the evening away over a newspaper at his solitary hearthstone, amid surroundings that expressed nothing so much as his own lack of interest in them.

Mr. Kelton occupied the principal floor of a fine, old house in a pleasant quarter. There were two time-worn drawing-rooms of stately proportions, formal and impersonal in the disposition of their appointments. For he had no sense of artistic arrangement, no consciousness of that deficiency; and daily life left none of the usual small traces upon his lodging, where all looked as if the tenant had absented himself indefinitely. His daily life, indeed, went on elsewhere. This had become a mere nocturnal shelter, the soul of which was wanting. Dust settled down upon its dim corners, to be disturbed only by special permission, given reluctantly at long intervals.

In one such corner was a low, mahogany cabinet filled with curios collected there by chance. Behind its glass door were huddled together lacquered boxes and sword-hilts from Japan; a dagger of Toledo; Chinese ivory carvings, Venetian glass, fragments of Greek pottery and Roman marbles. Amid this confusion a human skull grinned complacently, but half hidden by the Egyptian fez that adorned it. On the top of the cabinet stood two small bronze reproductions of the antique, — Silenus with his wine-cup, a flying faun, — and between them was a woman's photograph in a tarnished silver frame.

She had given him that faded likeness long ago, when she was Rose Douglas, and he not the least favored of her many suitors. The very fashion of its garments looked antiquated, absurdly out of date. All else, too, had suffered change. She was a middle-aged matron now, worldly-wise, triumphant, the wife of Stephen Middlecot, whose name and fortune all respected. If she ever called to mind Mr. Kelton's former protestations, it must have been to laugh at them. Yet his was a genuine passion, the sudden futility of which had embittered him. For though it had become a vague, displeasing memory whose full force was never admitted even to himself, that hope unrealized had changed the current of his after years, making them unprofitable and restless. The secret of Humphrey Kelton's life was bounded by that narrow frame. And with characteristic indifference he left the relic in its old place with other relics of extinct ages, disregarded.

Dining alone that night, he came away early from the club, where nothing in particular detained him. It was a fine, mild evening, and the theatre was not far off, or he would have resisted the temptation which suddenly presented itself. Why not stroll down there, since all conditions were favorable, and see what was going on? He went, consequently, to find the usual bustle of a first night about the theatre doors. Yet he procured without difficulty the single seat that he demanded; and, entering, encountered in the lobby the manager, Barnicoat Bradish, who, decked for the festivity in dress clothes, wore, besides, that air of supreme importance which the occasion warranted. Greeting Kelton cordially, he dragged him into his private office, among the photographs and mementos, for a cigarette and a word or two before the warning-bell.

"Plenty of time!" said he. "Orchestra not up yet. Very glad to see the distinguished stranger!"

He was a little, puffy man, fair and rosy, florid in style, several shades too kindly at best, and in his first-night manner unctuous. This, on the surface and before the curtain. There were depths behind, where, as it was darkly hinted, he became a despot of the deepest dye, fierce, implacable. Well inured to the manager's trade, he served the time and the public faithfully, with a keen scent for all that would keep him abreast of both. His besetting weakness was a yearning for social advancement, not in the least likely to be realized; yet he clung to the hope resolutely, and looking upon Kelton as one who might, some day, be helpful in this, strove always to ripen acquaintance with him. Kelton, who had only contempt for the peculiar ambition that betrayed itself at odd moments, respected his professional skill, and tolerated him accordingly.

"I wish you came oftener, old man!" went on the manager, pleasantly.

"Thanks," Kelton replied; "but you don't need me, to judge by the look of things. To-night, your house will hardly hold us."

"Well, business is fairly good, — in quality as well as quantity. The Middlecots have the lower box on the left, opposite mine."

"Ah!" said Kelton, in that tone of dry calmness which so often reduced conversation with him to a monologue.

"Yes; and there are several theatre-parties of the right sort, too, in the stalls. Not that it matters, but we like to keep our tone up, you know."

"Ah! How are the pieces? It 's a Jarvis night, I hear."

"Yes, he has his opportunity, especially in the comedy. The French thing is a gem in its way, — though much too refined for the public; but you 'll like it. There goes the bell! Drop in again later, won't you?"

Kelton returned thanks, without committing himself to another visit that he had no intention of making, and went off to his orchestra stall on one of the side aisles, a few rows from the stage. Far away on the left Mr. and Mrs. Middlecot were just entering the proscenium-box which Bradish had designated; with them was a tall, portly man, recognizable at once as John Ashley, the banker, Ashley and Company's controlling spirit. His was a presence of distinction, such as the manager would surely have chronicled had he been forewarned of it.

"Ives's patron!" Kelton murmured. "He little suspects what his precious cashier has been up and doing!"

Then discovering that Ives, himself, occupied one of the stalls in line with the great man, and catching his eye at the same moment, Kelton nodded to him across the house. There was a twinkle of mirth in the response, which implied that the young exploiter of the dramatic field had read his thought and found a certain grotesqueness in the situation.

Meanwhile, the orchestra battered with barbaric vigor at familiar music to which no one listened. The seats rattled down, the vacant spaces grew less evident. Behind Kelton one of Bradish's properly selected theatre-parties established itself, chattering incessantly. Before him, in the manager's box, suddenly appeared the quaint figure of Miss Kitty Colt. She was accompanied by her neighbor, Mr. Canterbury, the globe-maker, and a very stout woman of looks equally eccentric in her fairer and rosier way, — Mr. Canterbury's wife, as Kelton remembered. He decided now that the three made a picturesque group, contrasting finely with the conventional one opposite. But, clearly, there was in the box a fourth person whom he could not see, to whom from time to time their speech was addressed. The amiable Bradish, perhaps, had settled down with them as host in an interval of leisure.

To Ives, sitting alone, and, as it were, apart, these moments of expectation, that all around him took so calmly, proved absurdly agitating. In vain he argued that he was a mere interpreter, without responsibility for what the swaying curtain would so soon reveal. When it rolled away, disclosing the interior of a French château, so well set as to provoke a round of applause, his heart beat wildly. He could hardly hear the opening words, which, when all was said and done, were of his choosing. He perceived, however, that the audience listened respectfully, at least; and with the first ripple of laughter he began to regain composure. Thereafter, as it seemed, he acquired a sixth sense, enabling him to follow the action of the play and its effect upon the spectators at the same time. The cordial greeting to Jarvis, faultlessly made up as a Frenchman of the *ancien régime*, was an earnest of success; from that moment all went swimmingly.

In a glow of delight Ives watched the veteran sustain the difficult part through all its phases of wit, sentiment, and pathos, where nothing came "tardy off," nothing was overdone. Equally delighted was he at the general appreciation aroused by the actor's skill. The end brought a double recall for Jarvis and his fellow players. There were murmurs of genuine approval on all sides as Ives hurried out to meet the rapturous Bradish, who conducted him behind the scenes in time to catch Jarvis at the door of his dressing-room. There the actor and the translator exchanged congratulations, while the manager directed the stage-hands in their preparations for the first act of the comedy. The centre of the stage was all turmoil and confusion. So when Jarvis disappeared to change his dress, Ives passed down the "prompt-side" to its quiet corner at the curtain-line for a look at the front of the house.

The orchestra had resumed its thankless task; and beyond the diligent gesticulations of the leader's baton could be distinguished many familiar faces, with Kelton's standing out among them impenetrable as a mask. Ives turned from it to Miss Colt's cheerier one in the manager's box. From his seat he had already noted her presence; had identified Mr. Canterbury, of course, but not the globe-maker's wife, whom he had never seen before; and, like Kelton, he had wondered whether the invisible fourth person of the group was Bradish, or some one else. Now, from his commanding point of view behind the curtain, he saw that the fourth chair, in the background, was occupied by a young woman, who looked uncommonly like the pretty serving-maid of the night before in Gibbon Place. Strange! he thought; but, after all, not so strange! What more natural than that Miss Colt should prefer to come thus attended? It was the maid, unquestionably. Yet her present dress seemed as little like a maid's as possible; her whole bearing, too, disproved her station. She laughed and chatted now with the others upon familiar, equal terms. Then, a swift, illuminating process of the mind gave him the clue to the contradiction in the next instant. He remembered the mysterious, ever-present joke of last night, hovering about the maid, to Jarvis's infinite amusement and his own perplexity. The girl, for some reason unexplained, had disguised herself to wait upon the table. She was not a maid, at all. That accounted for her good looks and good manners. Why had he not suspected the truth at once? Simply because she had played the part to perfection. She was a brilliant, clever woman; he saw that now, even at a distance. Who, then, was she?

If Ives could only have overheard the conversation progressing at that moment on the other side of the wall against which he leaned, his last question would have been answered. Since the fall of the curtain Mrs. Middlecot had looked across at the manager's box; idly, at first, then with an interest which finally drew the attention of her companions that way.

"A queer party, Stephen, opposite!" she remarked to her husband. "I wonder who they can be."

"Where? Oh, in Bradish's box! Friends of his, I suppose, — but I don't know them."

"Such a comical little old woman!" continued his wife; "but the girl is very pretty. A fine, intelligent face! Mr. Ashley! Do you see?"

John Ashley, whose sight no longer was of the best, put up his glass; and, after an exclamation of surprise, he laughed heartily.

"Ah! you know them, then?" said Mrs. Middlecot.

"Not the old woman," he replied, with the glass still at his eyes. "No! I can't imagine who she is; but the young one, yes, — and the others. They are Mr. Canterbury and his wife, well worth knowing, too. And the girl is only my niece, Dorothy, — Dorothy Ashley."

"Dorothy Ashley!" repeated Mrs. Middlecot, overcome with surprise.

Mr. Ashley laughed again. "I don't wonder that you are startled," said he. "She does not live in town, and you have never heard of her. How should you hear? She is the only child of my elder brother, Dick, who died five years ago in Campfield, on the Connecticut. That has always been Dorothy's home. She is attached to the old place, and persists in remaining there, in spite of the fact that she is left very much alone; her mother, too, has died. We entice her out into the world, occasionally. She is visiting the Canterburys now, — her father's old friends; and she comes to my house, next week. You will meet her then, if not before. You have not forgotten that you are to dine with me."

"No; and now, I shan't forget. But I must n't wait till then to discover whether Miss Ashley is really as agreeable as she seems. I mean to call upon her at her friends' — you will give me their address. Stephen, do look at her!"

"Why, I am doing nothing else!" said Mr. Middlecot. "John! How on earth have you contrived to inherit such a relative as that?"

"By not deserving her, I suppose," Mr. Ashley explained. "Good relatives come of themselves, like all fate's pleasant caprices. I'll venture to state that Dorothy improves upon acquaintance. There is only one trouble with her. She has views."

Mrs. Middlecot half closed her deep-blue eyes, — the finest of her features, — and wrinkled her brow to suggest desperation. In youth, her face had been called handsome, but expressionless. Now that her dark hair was shot with gray, she had learned the value of expression, and, at her best, looked handsome still.

"Views!" she echoed. "That's bad. Can nothing be done about it?"

"Not by me!" asserted Mr. Ashley. "I talk with her, and waste my words. The fact is that I don't understand her. After all, that's not surprising, in an old bachelor like me. Now, if you —"

"If I would talk with her, you mean?" asked Mrs. Middlecot. "Why, I should have difficulty in understanding her, myself. I have n't any views."

"Precisely. And she would profit by the force of your example. She might learn, then, that it is the perfection of woman to be characterless, as Coleridge said."

Mrs. Middlecot straightened in her chair, and opened her eyes to the full extent. "Characterless! Did Coleridge say that, Mr. Ashley?"

"Yes; and called Shakespeare to witness, citing Ophelia and Desdemona as his ideal, perfect women."

"One went mad, and the other married a black man!" retorted Mrs. Middlecot. "And how about Rosalind? And Portia? And Viola? And Beatrice, too, for that matter? Upon the whole, Mr. Ashley, I can't agree with Coleridge."

"You have put your foot in it, now, John!" said her husband, laughing. "I am afraid that, in your observations of bachelors' wives, you forgot to allow for the personal equation."

"Not a bit of it!" protested Mr. Ashley. "Characterless means, — well, it means — "

"It means devoid of character," said Mrs. Middlecot. "I would n't try to improve the definition, if I were you. Stephen, behave yourself! Hush! The curtain!"

Moving outward through the theatre lobby when the comedy was over, Ives, as it happened, found himself next to the Middlecot party, and he walked on with Mrs. Middlecot to the doors.

"What talent Jarvis has!" she remarked. "To take that coarse parvenu part after the other, and do both equally well!"

"Yes," asserted Ives; "he is very sure."

"I liked the first part best," Mrs. Middlecot pursued. "A delightful little play! Who translated it, I wonder?"

Ives wondered, too.

"The work was remarkably good," she declared. "Every word told. I should never have guessed it to be a translation."

Ives blessed her, inwardly.

"Don't you agree with me?" demanded the lady, imperiously, with a shade of vexation at his silence.

"Yes, in part," he replied. "Some credit, no doubt, is due to the translator. Yet, given a strong original, it can't be so very difficult to find an equivalent that will tell, — in prose, at least."

"Can't it, indeed? That may be, but neither you nor I could have done it, I am sure."

"I am sure of one," laughed he.

"And it's just like you critical Bostonians," she went on, indignantly, "to like parts of things."

"'You critical Bostonians'!" he repeated. "Why, are n't we in the same boat?"

"By marriage only, so far as I am concerned," said Mrs. Middlecot. "I was born in New York, and never cease to be thankful."

"That accounts for it. What a pity that this clever, anonymous Bostonian, who is probably over-critical of himself, should not hear you sound his praises!"

"He is probably starving for lack of one kind word. Discover him for me, please, if you can. I really want to know him very much."

Ives laughed lightly. "I will do my best, then, — not to discover him."

"That's very kind of you. Why?"

"Lest you should turn his head with your foreign-born enthusiasm."

"Still more kind of you! No matter; I'll discover him, myself."

"What are you two quarreling about?" inquired Mr. Middlecot, as they all came out into the night together.

"We are not quarreling," said his wife. "I have made a bet with Mr. Ives, that's all, — that I will establish the authorship of 'Love-in-Idleness' before he does."

"Oh, but I thought the Frenchman's name was printed in the bill. See, here it is!"

"Quite right, Mr. Middlecot!" Ives interposed. "The author's name *is* there!"

"Don't quibble, please!" said Mrs. Middlecot, severely. "I meant the American author, not the French one, Stephen."

"Ah, the translator!"

"Yes, — to be accurate!" she returned. "We must speak by the card, I see, as Hamlet says. But it's all clear now, I hope. Here's the carriage, — and here's my hand, Mr. Ives, to seal the bargain. Good-night!"

At parting, Mr. Ashley detained Ives a moment to say that he hoped for a favorable answer to a note, just posted, — an invitation to dinner on a night of the week following, to meet his niece. Ives had no engagement, and accepted it with thanks, *viva voce*, wondering mentally who the niece might be.

Left alone when the carriage drove off, Ives walked homeward briskly, taking all his street-crossings at acute angles. Midway in one of these, he came upon a man's figure moving at a slower pace, gradually defining itself through the darkness as Kelton's.

"Hail, dramatist!" cried the figure, with a mock salute. "Why so fast?"

"I fly from the crime and its consequences," said Ives, lightly, checking his speed at once.

"The guilty don't escape so easily, — as you'll see when you read Chilworth in the morning."

"Who knows?" Ives retorted, as they walked on together. "He may have liked it."

"Very probably," conceded Kelton. "Your piece was the better of the two in my opinion, — much the better."

"Good!" said Ives, betraying in his tone surprise and pleasure.

Kelton chuckled. "Yes," continued he; "it was short."

"Good again!" said Ives, undaunted.

"Cheer up, my boy!" Kelton urged, hopefully. "Things will be worse to-morrow. Meanwhile, here 's my door; come in and smoke a cigar with me. I 'll find a bottle of something, somewhere. Come! It 's not bedtime yet."

Curious about Kelton's lodging, which he did not know, Ives yielded readily. Kelton, leading the way, struck a light; then, advising his guest to choose a comfortable chair, if such could be found, and to take a cigar from the box upon the table, he went off in search of his promised bottle.

Ives lighted the cigar; but, instead of seating himself, he moved about for a general survey of the rooms, with a swift conclusion that they were highly characteristic of their occupant. When he came to the cabinet of curios, he stopped to consider these in detail; and, taking up the photograph, examined it closely. "Mrs. Middlecot in a former state; yes, it must be!" he decided. "Strange, to find that here!" Then, at the sound of his host's returning footstep, he cut short his reflections, and, hurriedly putting down the portrait, turned his back upon it.

"This is all most comfortable," he remarked later, as they sat smoking over the whiskey which Kelton had procured. "Are you an old inhabitant?"

"Let me see," Kelton reckoned; "I date from a dozen years ago, — yes, all of that. It suits me exactly, that 's the main point; and it 's not so bad, I suppose."

"Decidedly not. I wish my own place were half so good."

"Better it, then, by all means, if you can. A wise man sets up the best quarters possible to his condition, as a barrier between him and the world's temptations, — a safeguard against that worst of all others, the matrimonial one."

Ives laughed. "That 's a new remedy!" he argued. "Some of us scarcely need it."

"Some of us, my boy, have reached the age of wisdom."

"Ah! and what is that?"

"Thackeray put it once at 'forty year,'" said Kelton, enveloping himself in a cloud of smoke; "but the times are altered, and I am not so sanguine. Let us call it forty-five, when, according to our Autocrat, old age begins."

"Why, this is horrible!" laughed Ives again. "While you are entirely safe, eighteen years of danger remain to me."

"Supposing you to be normal, yes."

"Yes, but I'm not!" declared Ives, emphatically. "I'm enlightened, illuminated. With me marriage has ceased to be a disturbing influence; it never enters into my calculations at all."

"I like to hear you say it. And you mean it, too, probably."

"Of course I mean it. I really believe, Kelton, that I am as unlikely to marry as any man in this world, — excepting possibly yourself."

"Good!" said Kelton. "Stick to that, if you can; but ah! those eighteen years! There are, — nine times twelve are a hundred and eight, — yes, two hundred and sixteen moons in them, — and moons are changeable."

"I never sleep in the moonlight," Ives protested. "Do you take me for Endymion?"

"Put up the bars, nevertheless!" insisted his hospitable mentor. "You can't be too careful. Your present dramatic ambition may serve as one, if it holds; but my own pet barrier, after all, is the surest.

Make your immediate surroundings thoroughly comfortable. Be like the hermit-crab, who, when his shell is outgrown, removes at once to another, always choosing one larger and finer than the last. He is your model bachelor. Then, if you beware of juxtaposition — "

"Juxtaposition?"

"Yes. Have you forgotten Clough's remarks upon that? — or don't you young men read Clough nowadays? Wait a bit, I 'll find it for you!" Then, jumping up, Kelton presently brought the book, scattered the dust from its leaves and turned to the passage. "Here you are! — 'Allah is great, no doubt, and Juxtaposition his prophet.' There 's more about it, too. It points the moral and adorns the tale. The hero escapes Juxtaposition, and goes scot-free. It 's all in 'Amours de Voyage,' — a great poem! '*Solvitur ambulando*' is its motto. Remember that!"

"I will," Ives promised, with a smile. "As for Juxtaposition, forewarned is forearmed. I defy the matrimonial prophet and all his works."

Kelton shrugged his shoulders. "The confidence of youth!" said he. "Well, I 've warned you. By the way," he went on, "an idea strikes me, — a good one. Morris, the architect, has just vacated the rooms over these, — he is getting married, poor devil! Why should n't you take up with the empty shell? It has possibilities that are by no means expensive."

"The idea is worth considering, but — "

"Then the sooner, the better; consider it now. The rooms are open. I will show them to you."

Upon the word, accordingly, they proceeded to the upper floor, which Kelton displayed to the best advantage. The ceilings were lower than his own, and the appointments otherwise somewhat less pretentious; but all was in good order, and even in their emptiness the rooms suggested comfort. Ives, already, could see himself established there at ease. The nominal rent, however, upon inquiry proved more than he cared to pay. He said so frankly, as they came down.

"The asking price!" replied Kelton, whose idea was fast becoming fixed. "Tenants of the better sort are scarce, and not to be dealt with lightly. Make an offer, — or, rather, let me make it. I will negotiate for you."

Ives thanked him, and deciding at once upon the terms of the prospective bargain, left the matter in Kelton's hands. He went away with something more than a young man's sense of pleasure at the friendly advance of an older one whom he likes, — distinctly gratified, indeed, by the desire for closer relationship thus manifested. "We should make good neighbors," he thought; "not too companionable! Kelton's views of life are edifying; I wonder how he came by them. Is Mrs. Middlecot's early likeness a warning or a remembrance? Who shall say? Not he!"

Meanwhile Kelton, who had accompanied his guest to the outer door, climbed slowly to his hermitage. "Good fellow, that! If only the bee of marriage does not buzz into his bonnet!" he muttered, closing his inner door upon the world. The jar, slight as that was, rattled down the woman's portrait, — his warning or remembrance, — in its metal frame upon the shelf where Ives had replaced it insecurely. Kelton turned at the sound, and bringing the half-forgotten relic into the light, studied its wan features with a mocking smile. The lines were lines of beauty still. How well he remembered when she looked like that! Then, with the sudden revulsion of feeling which may overcome unexpectedly the most persistent scoffer, there swept before him unbidden, in a kind of calenture, the phantasm of his ideal future, as he had planned it in those bygone days. He saw his own hearthstone glorified by this woman's presence, in the very colors she had worn. The firelight gleamed upon her cheek, her hair, — irradiating all the figure, like an aureole. She smiled upon him sweetly, still young, still beautiful. It was as if some shuttered window in the dead of night had sprung open mysteriously to reveal a sunlit landscape. For a moment only! In the next the shutters closed again, the radiance was gone. And he, coming to himself, without even the tribute of a sigh, put the charm that had wrought the momentary spell back into its place among his curios. Then, opening the old volume of Clough, he sat down by the heap of ashes on his lonely hearth, and read his favorite "Amours de Voyage" once more, from beginning to end.

III

PEBBLES IN WATER

When Mrs. Middlecot drove into Gibbon Place, a few days later, for the afternoon call upon Miss Dorothy Ashley to which she had pledged herself, it was, as she told her husband afterward, to be "consumed with curiosity." In avoiding the precipitous descent of the hill her coachman had taken a roundabout way through shabby streets given up to the small trade of a poor, overcrowded quarter where the long lines of sunless shop-fronts grew more and more depressing. And when, after turning from all this unpleasantness into a region of melancholy repose, the horses at last stood still before the wooden barrier of the "oasis," it seemed to her that she had come to the world's end. The Canterburys' door was a few steps farther on, and, as she walked toward it, she looked askance at the severely respectable old houses, wondering what sort of dreary life went on in them. But if the environment impressed her as more sombre than picturesque, the incursion itself had all the charm of novelty; and she pursued it with delight across the Canterbury threshold, upon the information that Miss Ashley was at home to visitors.

The ground-floor room in front where she awaited Miss Ashley's coming had a character of its own which interested her. She decided at the first glance that every article of furniture must be, at least, a generation old; and there was "an air" about them all, though one too formal for comfort. The impulse of a housekeeper in such cases is always toward rearrangement; and Mrs. Middlecot could scarcely restrain herself from pulling certain chairs and tables out from the wall to make a chief point of interest near the really fine old English fireplace. The portrait, above it, of an angular woman in a flowered gown, — probably a Copley, — hung much too high. That was the best thing in the room, of course; though there stood out from a dark corner a large, celestial globe, pleasantly mellowed by time, which struck her as a most unusual object, looking as if it had a history. She turned from this for a satisfying moment before the mirror, in its old-fashioned frame of tarnished gilt, which occupied the space between the windows. On the table under it was a glass dish containing a heap of pebbles, — red, orange, green, white, — collected there, apparently, for the sake of their brilliant variety in color. This, too, seemed most unusual. She picked up one of the bright stones to examine it, and found with some dismay that she had dipped her fingers into clear water which filled the glass to the very brim. Laying the pebble down, she shook the drops from her gloved hand; and at that moment Miss Ashley came in upon her with a pleasant greeting.

"Younger than I supposed, — not over twenty-five, at most!" thought Mrs. Middlecot; "pretty, very pretty, though not handsome. Her eyes are of no particular color, and too far apart; a good figure, but no style!" Thus, passing mentally to the details of a dress, too simple for the prevailing fashion, she feared that Miss Ashley had a soul above clothes. Then, yielding, despite this attitude of partial resistance, to the girl's unconscious charm, she forgot to criticize; and, in a very few moments, as she subsequently declared, was carried away by her.

Miss Ashley's eyes, unclassable at first sight, were, in fact, very animated gray ones; and, if wide apart, they were also wide open, frank, and fearless, with a clear light in them. Her complexion, neither blond nor brunette, was by no means colorless. She had fine, brown hair in abundance; and in her arrangement of that and of her dress she obeyed an instinct which, though not, perhaps, uniformly unerring, was always founded upon her own ideas of good taste. In these matters she did what she conceived best suited to her; took thought of it at the time, and, then, once for all, dismissed the thought. A similar instinct of good taste guided and controlled her manners, in which consideration of others held always the first place, and that of the effect which she, herself, was making no place at all. Her behavior, in short, was as simple and unaffected as her dress. She enjoyed life heartily, taking for granted the enjoyment of those with whom she came in contact. A sound, cheerful, light-hearted outlook upon the world, illuminating all her features, made friends for her at once in all classes of society.

No one could be long indifferent to her, for she was indifferent to none.

After a word of thanks for the visit, Miss Ashley spoke of the theatre where she had seen Mrs. Middlecot at a distance, across the house.

"You had the lower box," she said; "Uncle John was with you."

"Yes," said Mrs. Middlecot; "oh, and that reminds me! Who was the dear little old lady in your box? Mr. Ashley did not recognize her."

"Miss Colt, you mean. It was her box, not ours. Mr. Jarvis sent it to her. She is a dear,—that 's just the word." And Miss Ashley strengthened the assertion by a brief review of Miss Colt's past and present history, which served to show that the prevalent respect of the neighborhood for the retired actress was well founded.

Mrs. Middlecot listened eagerly, with a feeling that instead of this world's end she had found a new world's beginning.

"And so Mr. Jarvis lives there," she said, at last. "He is your neighbor, then. Do you see him, sometimes?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. Canterbury and he are old friends, as well as neighbors; he often comes here."

"How delightful to see and know him intimately, in his habit as he lives. He must have had so many interesting experiences."

"Yes," assented Miss Ashley. "If one only knew how to get at them! Mr. Jarvis is a very reserved man, — especially about himself; altogether too modest, according to Mr. Canterbury, for this workaday world."

"I am sure of that," Mrs. Middlecot agreed. "Otherwise, he would be far better known, — famous, indeed, the world over. At his best, in his own peculiar line, he stands unrivaled. The other night, he was really great. Don't you think so?"

"I am hardly an authority," said Miss Ashley, smiling; "but I can imagine nothing better, — especially in the first play, — 'Love-in-Idleness.'"

"Oh, that was simply perfect, — his ideal part! I wonder who translated it for him."

"I can tell you. It was done by a Mr. Ives."

"Mr. Ives? Mr. Ives? Not Staunton Ives, surely?"

"Yes," replied Miss Ashley, with confidence. "That is his name."

Mrs. Middlecot laughed, without explaining why. "Is it possible?" she asked. "I never should have thought it of him. Should you?"

"I know Mr. Ives only by sight," Miss Ashley answered. "Yet I am sure that it was he. Mr. Ives, himself, is directly responsible for the statement which I heard, the other evening, at Miss Colt's. So there can be no mistake, you see."

Again Mrs. Middlecot laughed, with no apparent reason. "Well," she said, "he is to be congratulated upon a clever piece of work;" adding mentally: "And I owe him one, too, for deceiving me so cleverly!"

Then she turned from that subject to other things;

inquired about the portrait, which proved indeed to be a Copley, and moved nearer to admire it. Passing next to the celestial globe, she eyed its quaintly drawn constellations curiously.

"This must be very old," she suggested.

"The maps are old," said Miss Ashley, twirling the globe slowly, to display them all in turn. "They were engraved in Venice, two hundred years ago, at least. But the globe is modern. Uncle Goff — Mr. Canterbury — made that, himself."

"He made that, — Mr. Canterbury?"

"Yes. Did n't you know?" said Miss Ashley, laughing. "That is his occupation. He makes globes, here, — in this house."

Mrs. Middlecot, in bewilderment, glanced vaguely about, as if for traces of the process. "Here!" she repeated. "Is it possible? How strange that seems!"

"Oh, not in this room!" Miss Ashley explained. "He has a workshop." Then, moved thereto by her visitor's eager face, she added: "Would you like to look at it? It might interest you to see how the work is done."

"I should like it of all things! If your uncle would not object —"

"Mr. Canterbury? Oh, no! He is n't really my uncle, I only call him that, — but I know he will be delighted to see us. Come!"

So, without more ado, Miss Ashley led the way into the back hall of the main house, and thence through a narrow, well-lighted passage running the whole length of a wing directly to an inner door communicating with the shop. The yard-space inclosed by the house and its dependencies, neatly kept, as Mrs. Middlecot discerned, was bright with autumnal flowers. And the shop proved to be a three-storied structure of brick, built across the back of the yard with a wide frontage upon an insignificant street in the rear, which gave access to the building for all commercial purposes. Entering thus by the postern gate, they emerged in a large low room furnished with a carpenter's bench, a forge, and other mysteries of construction; and crossed through a wilderness of packing-cases to some ladder-like stairs, up which they climbed into a light, airy room occupying the entire second floor. Here was the main workshop; and here they found Mr. Canterbury busy with the trim young woman and the boy who constituted his corps of assistants. These latter, scarcely noticing the interruption, remained intent upon their tasks. But Mr. Canterbury, himself, dropped his tools to meet them with a pleasant smile. His day's work was so nearly done that he was only too glad to break it off then and there; and upon introduction to the visitor he proceeded at once to do the honors of his queer *atelier*, which, aside from the special interest of the craft, held the general charm of antiquity; since the place had been his father's as well as his own, and the gradual changes of two generations in it were imperceptible.

The rough brick walls at either end were lined with racks, where hung innumerable wooden globe-forms of various sizes, painted a uniform black. Others in use were scattered about the pasting-table, damp, wrinkled, disagreeable objects, coated with wet paper in clinging layers. Mr. Canterbury explained that the paper was first dried, and then detached, in hemispheres, with a sharp knife drawn along the circumference-line. And turning to the next stage of the process he showed the hemispheres fitted together, smoothed, sized, and polished, into a shining, snow-white cannon-ball. So, with a practical demonstration of each succeeding stage, he followed the sphere through its nice adjustment upon a wooden axis, — called an arbor in mechanics, — its weighting and counter-weighting, until it was ready for the maps which were put on in gores. A chest of drawers contained their shining copperplates, bright as mirrors. Mrs. Middlecot gazed in silent wonder at the intricate network of lines upon them; then turning to a glass table under the north window, she watched for a moment the young woman who was engaged in painting an Asia of pale lemon color. This seemed so pleasant and so comprehensible a piece of work that she longed to try her own hand at it. But the others called her away to an upper floor where on a huge, hanging shelf an array of globes, large and small, glistened under fresh coats of varnish, which, recklessly applied, had been splashed everywhere about on shelf, floor, and walls; the air was heavy with it.

"And this is all," she said, as they came down; "now, the globe is done."

Mr. Canterbury smiled upon her somewhat sadly. "Not quite!" he answered, while she noticed for the first time his uncommon gentleness. "Not quite! There is the meridian-circle still to be considered." And he drew her attention to a heavy iron stand supporting a flat top, deeply incised with cabalistic signs and fitted with a running-gear equally mysterious. "The graduating-table!" he continued. Then, bringing his slender white hands to bear upon the machinery, he bade her observe the magnifying mirror suspended in it at such an angle as to reflect the degrees engraved upon the polished surface underneath; through which simple means he was enabled to reproduce them, one by one, on the brass meridian. He clamped a curved strip of metal into its place by way of illustration, and displayed his engraving-tools.

"What a labor!" cried Mrs. Middlecot, in astonishment. "And you do all this, yourself?"

"Oh, yes. It must be done accurately, you see, — very accurately, like all the rest. I could trust no one else."

"Such a world of pains at every step!" she pursued, looking round the room once more; "and a false step anywhere would be fatal."

His responsive smile, this time, seemed to her pathetic. "More pains, — as I used to think," said he, "than the steps are worth when all have been taken. The return was never vast; but we all must live the life allotted to us, — and this is mine. I know no other."

"I should think that you would lie awake over it," said Mrs. Middlecot, sympathetically; "or dream distracting nightmares."

"Not now. Now it does not trouble me. The practice of an art — and this really is one — brings its own inestimable compensations. I chose it willingly; and I have done as well as I could with it always."

"He makes the best globes in the whole world," whispered Miss Ashley, in an audible aside.

"We don't say that!" he commented, with a sparkle in his eyes which betrayed the hope, never otherwise expressed, that he had not lived wholly in vain. "We only say that we have never happened to see, anywhere, better work of its kind than ours."

"There could n't be any," said Mrs. Middlecot, laying her hand lightly on a twelve-inch globe that stood near, ready for mounting. "This is simply perfect. Even the great globe in Venice, I am sure, is no better."

"Ah! In Venice?" he repeated.

"Yes, — in the Ducal Palace. I saw it once, myself."

"A Coronelli, perhaps. The Italians were good globe-makers, — the Spaniards, too. What is that one like? I have never seen it."

"It is very old, and big, and yellow, — very yellow."

"Copal varnish!" mused Mr. Canterbury. "That was the old way. Ours, of shellac, holds its own better."

Mrs. Middlecot was half-impelled to answer that, artistically speaking, she liked her globes best, done in the old way, when time had yellowed them; but she discreetly kept this thought to herself, only returning thanks for Mr. Canterbury's kindness.

"It has been most interesting," she added. "I have enjoyed it all so much!"

"I am very glad," he responded, shyly, as they shook hands.

Miss Ashley opened the house door. "Are n't you coming in for tea, Uncle Goff?" she asked. "It is time."

"Not just yet, my dear, — not just yet. I must clear up a little, first." And he quietly turned his back upon them.

Mrs. Middlecot reiterated her phrases of delight, as they returned to the ground-floor room, where a fire had been lighted. The tea-table stood in a corner near one of the windows; and behind the steaming urn she recognized at once the fair, stout woman who had been of Miss Ashley's party at the theatre.

"Aunt Lois! This is Mrs. Middlecot," said Dorothy, explaining and introducing in the same breath; "we have been over the workshop. Mrs. Middlecot, — Mrs. Canterbury."

Murmuring an incoherent welcome, the hostess rose from her place to bear down upon them with a genial smile; then, offering her hand, she dropped a formal curtsy, easily and lightly, — an accomplishment which, from her unusual size and weight, startled the visitor.

"Such a delightful time!" gasped Mrs. Middlecot, seeking to smother her astonishment in cordiality.

"Really, you know, — such mysteries, — so exciting! Mr. Canterbury showed me everything. So very kind!"

If Mrs. Canterbury wondered what strange manner of woman had come upon her, she betrayed the wonder only by fixed, unnatural calmness. Moving forward a chair, she left the stranger to recover herself therein, and drifted toward the window noiselessly, like a soap-bubble.

"Cream?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," said Mrs. Middlecot, descending from her enthusiastic flight to earth again.

"Sugar?"

"Two lumps, please."

"We tried to bring Uncle Goff back with us," said Miss Ashley, passing the cup; "but he would n't come."

"No, my dear. He will come later, much later, — when the tea is cold. I know! But the globes are good ones, I suppose. You think so?"

The inquiry was addressed to Mrs. Middlecot who, thus encouraged, justified her interest, more rationally than before. It was all so new to her, as she explained in conclusion.

"They would interest me more, if I understood 'em," said Mrs. Canterbury. "But it 's no use. I can't. Just as well, perhaps. Some one has to make the tea. *He* could n't."

Mrs. Middlecot was sure that he could n't, — at least, so excellently well; then the Copley portrait inspired her again, most happily; for at the mention of it the excelling tea-maker expanded and beamed. The picture, the likeness of a certain Miss Prime, had become hers through inheritance; she was a Prime, herself, — indeed, *all* Prime, as tradition informed her, — and by no means sorry to direct attention to that fact. She began to realize at this point that Miss Ashley's new acquaintance, whoever she might be, was not hopelessly flighty and "fashionable," but had germs of intelligence as well as good taste and discrimination. Before the visit was ended, she was "drawn to her," as she said afterward, and hoped that they might meet again. Truly, a chance word is like a stone flung into the water, extending its influence in wider and wider circles, beyond the reach of reckoning. Upon the word and the moment hangs the question whether that influence shall work good or ill to the projector; and the god of tact alone can answer it.

When Mrs. Middlecot rose to go, she recollected that she had put away somewhere her sun-umbrella, a fluffy thing of lace, ornamental as well as useful, too precious to be left behind. A general search followed; but she, herself, discovered it, in a dark spot between the windows, standing beside the table where she had laid the pebble down. As she picked this up to replace it among the others, she perceived that its color, which before had been conspicuously bright, was now gone; and she paused a moment to comment upon the pretty effect produced by the group of stones, contrasting them with the one in her hand, dim, gray and lustreless. Then she dropped it back into the water, and smiled at its brilliant transformation.

"I was n't fair to it," she said.

"No!" agreed Mrs. Canterbury. "That 's a Cape Ann pebble, — one of my best."

"Ah! You know them all, then?"

"Of course. I collected them all, myself. I never go to the seashore anywhere without bringing one away. My husband laughs at me. But I don't mind, — I just let him run on; it gives him a chance to moralize, and that always does him good."

"And what moral does he draw?" inquired Mrs. Middlecot, turning at the threshold.

"Oh, he says we 're like that, all of us, — shining only in our natural element, always at a disadvantage out of it! Men, you know, can find an excuse for anything. And that 's his for burying himself in his workshop, sticking, sticking, sticking to his globes; they are good ones, I suppose, but I don't believe they 'd be a bit the worse if he saw some human creature occasionally, beside old Jarvis and Mr. Kelton."

"Kelton? Not Humphrey Kelton?"

"Yes, that 's his name. A friend of yours?"

"No. I have met him, that 's all," said Mrs. Middlecot, shaking hands right and left, in the hurry of departure. "Good-bye! and thank you so much. Do come to see me, and tell Mr. Canterbury I know all about globes, and that if he comes with you, his will be the better for it. Remember!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Canterbury, curtsying low, once more. "I 'll tell him."

Waving a final farewell the visitor whirled away, and was gone. "Kelton!" she repeated, as she drove toward home. "So he goes there! Well, I can't wonder. But we are desperately out of it! To think that real lives like these should exist here in the very heart of us, and we not know!"

IV

A CRESCENT MOON

There are times in all lives when the laboring, leaden hours seem, as if by mutual agreement, suddenly to change their gait and chase one another forward on flying feet; when Fortune showers her gifts so lavishly and so swiftly that the old self of a week ago is hardly recognizable in a backward glance, and to the new one all the future shines unclouded. These are times when the sage prudently reflects upon the anomalies of nature, and girds himself for an encounter with the unexpected which always happens; while the novice, seeing all around him only sunlight, steps, as it were, on air, straight toward the danger-line.

Through such an epoch Staunton Ives was passing; and as he walked down the slope of Beacon Hill on his way to John Ashley's dinner-party, the precipitation of happy accidents in the last ten days appeared to his reflective mind little short of miraculous. To begin with, there was the unquestionable success of "Love-in-Idleness." That small pearl from the French fisheries had "caught on" for a long run, as they told him at the theatre. The newspaper notices, one and all, were full and favorable. Even the great Chilworth, after a glowing tribute to Jarvis in his New York letter, had gone the length of a patronizing line on the dramatist's account. "The anonymous translator deserves praise for the neatness of his workmanship." The words were written across the sky in letters of fire, and Ives knew them by heart. Because of them, undoubtedly, it was that Bradish had accepted an original two-act play from Ives's pen, after much trembling of the balance. Its author, indeed, suspected that the cautious manager, artful in excuses of postponement, had never looked at the work until he was driven to it by those compelling compliments of the morning after. Now, however, he wrote with many a flourish that the little piece proved, in his judgment, to be a highly creditable production; that he should place it at once in rehearsal for an initial performance at the earliest possible moment; adding in simpler phrase, as though with a wink, that in such cases it was well to drive the nail home; by which turn of his facile pen he betrayed clearly enough the influence of public approval upon a master-mind, even when that is critically absolute, as Bradish fancied his own to be.

The other line of advance, along which Ives had taken a flying leap, was a parallel one, in no way connected either with the capricious theatrical public or the finished art of Adam Jarvis. The house of Ashley and Company, finding Mr. Ives a fit subject for promotion, had promoted him consequently, with increase of pay, to a post of increased responsibility, one remove only from a partnership. The chief nodded, and the thing was done; it had happened in a moment, with no other preparatory influence than Ives's individual merit, working from within. This he understood, of course; recognizing a just ground for reasonable pride to which he was by no means indifferent. Yet there seemed something fantastic in its occurrence at this particular point upon the calendar. He could scarcely think of that without a smile; and when he did think of it, weighing and comparing his honors commercial and otherwise, the prospective artistic ones appeared by far the more momentous. The bird in the hand, caught and caged, was an excellent bird of its kind; but those in the bush were of finer quality.

One material benefit, however, had immediately followed the promotion. His strengthened resources enabled him at once to adopt Kelton's suggestion in the matter of the coveted rooms, which through the good offices of that intermediary were already secured at a fair price. He was to move into them without delay. Proper migration of the hermit-crab! Light-hearted thought, that made his heart grow lighter!

The quick-descending night was cool and cloudless. The English elms in the Mall still kept their leaves. But all the other trees were bare; through their interwoven branches Ives looked up at the cheerful stars, and down again at a broad expanse of clear sky, where the new moon hung low in the west. He saw its thin sickle for the first time over his left shoulder, and laughingly defied the omen. Such childish warnings were not for him, or were to be interpreted by contraries, like the stuff that dreams are made on. The moon was a poor, watery thing, at best. He could trust himself to the stars, those higher authorities, whose signs manifestly were all in his favor. They shed their unobstructed light upon him when he crossed into the open garden, where the moon, hidden away among the housetops, out of sight was out of mind.

Mr. Ashley's house faced north upon the Avenue. It was vast and imposing, in a cumbrous, nondescript style of architecture, which prevailed for a few years only and is now happily out of date. Monumental steps led to a cavernous doorway, suggesting the entrance of a mausoleum ; and this first impression of gloom upon a grand scale was carried on within by dark walls absorbing light, by heavy mouldings with cornices too high for comfort. In spite of certain rich appointments and one or two fine pictures, the ill-proportioned rooms looked bare and cold, given over to mere formal costliness, yet lacking splendor. Ives had seen it all before, and had asked himself how a man of Mr. Ashley's keen perceptions could be content to express them so primitively. Now, coming last into the big drawing-room, he found it for the first time really habitable ; the jewels and bright colors that the women wore were predominant ; perhaps some feminine presence, permanently bright against the dull background, was the one thing needed there, after all.

"Yes ; it has always been my dream," Mr. Ashley said to Mrs. Middlecot, as Ives crossed the threshold.

Then he turned to greet his tardy guest and guide him for formal presentation to his niece, who stood near by. Ives wondered, meanwhile, what the unspecified dream might be. He had never before known Mr. Ashley to admit that he encouraged dreams at all.

"Dorothy, this is Mr. Staunton Ives. My niece, Miss Ashley!"

The host dropped back. The guest advanced, and knew, instantly, that he looked upon the pretty, girlish face, demure, yet with a gleam of mischief underlying its heightened color, not for the first, but for the third time. Surprise made him speechless at the moment. Then she spoke for him.

"I knew we were to meet," she said. "You did n't, did you?"

"Oh, yes; but not that we had met before."

"Hush! We have n't, you remember. How could you meet the maid's 'understudy'? Miss Colt never would have permitted it."

"But—"

"No matter now. We will discuss it later. You are to take in Alice Orbitt. Do you know her?"

"Miss Orbitt,—yes. She is there, under the lamp,—"

"And waiting for you. They are going in. You are on the right,—next to me."

"So much, so very much the better,—for me, as well as the discussion."

Dismissed with a responsive smile, he turned at once to the companion she had designated.

Miss Orbitt, whose name carried distinction therewith, had been at every important social function that he could remember during the last two seasons, and was therefore an old acquaintance. She belonged to the younger generation of a large, well-known Boston family, respected alike for its virtues and its peculiar prejudices, so marked as almost to make the clan a law unto itself. In all New England communities to be an Orbitt was to be above suspicion, acceptable, accepted.

Southward and westward beyond this pale it was sometimes maliciously whispered that the aristocracy of the Orbitts had a strong tinge of self-complacent provincialism. But when such refractory speeches reached their ears, the Orbitts tossed their heads and laughed indulgently. One could not be an Orbitt, of course, without exciting jealousy. They pitied their vulgar detractors and pardoned them.

This late offshoot of the parent stem had the charm of youth. In complexion she was a colorless blonde, with china-blue eyes, — her best features, by no means bad in their way. If any pride of race lurked behind them, she did her best to disguise it. For she honestly considered herself plain, and reverenced so little the traditions of her kindred that her chief desire, as she often expressed it, was to be like other people ; in which aspiration she had thus far succeeded so well as to warrant Mrs. Middlecot's remark that Alice was "the best of all the Orbitts."

" Well, how do you like her ? " She now asked, as they walked toward the dining-room.

" Miss Ashley, you mean ; very much, — as much, in fact, as my limited acquaintance with her allows."

" Time will remove that difficulty," said Miss Orbitt, laughing. " We shall all learn to know her better. She is coming here to live, you know, — here, in this house, with her uncle."

" No, indeed, I did not know."

" Yes. It 's a pet scheme of his, which he has been urging for some time persistently. Now, at last, she has agreed to it and will soon be turned into a good Bostonian."

" So that was Mr. Ashley's dream ! " Ives thought.

Then, as they all sat down together, Miss Orbitt, leaning forward, emphasized her speech by repeating it to Dorothy in slightly altered form.

" I have been telling Mr. Ives," she said, " how soon we are to make a good Bostonian of you."

Miss Ashley smiled. " It won't take long, I hope," she replied, " with so many fine examples of the type to study."

" And, to speak for the moment theatrically," Ives remarked, " with such ' quick study ' as yours ! "

" Thank you ! " she retorted, again demurely mischievous. " Bostonians, they say, are noted for discernment. Is it true ? "

Before he could answer, the guest at Dorothy's left hand diverted her attention and Miss Orbitt engaged his own. The dinner was well advanced when their first opportunity for conversation came.

“Now, tell me, please,” he began, in a kind of confidential stage-whisper, “how it all happened.”

“It was the simplest thing in the world,” Miss Ashley explained, after assuring herself by a glance that he was the only listener; “the maid was suddenly taken ill, and I begged to be allowed to help. Miss Colt enjoyed the joke immensely; so did I, too, when I found that her guests were none the wiser.”

“On the contrary — ”

“Nonsense! Why, you did not even guess!”

“You played the part well, I admit —”

“That 's very flattering. One small suspicion, however, would have been more flattering still; yet you had none. But for this chance meeting, almost upon the instant, you would never have known.”

“Excuse me, with ten years added to the instant, I should still have known. There are faces, you see, that one does not forget.”

“Thank you; but ten years! That carries the compliment too far. Why, in ten years, Time would shield me in my masquerading with a mask of his own!”

“I surrender!” Ives laughed. “As the coon said to the mighty hunter, ‘Don’t shoot, I ’ll come down!’”

“Agreed, if you won’t betray me! Oh, but I forget! I am the last person to exact such a promise, for most inconsiderately I have betrayed you.”

“Betrayed me? How, pray?”

“Have you forgotten that you are a masquerader, too? In the matter of the play, I mean. The other day, in my presence, Mrs. Middlecot wondered who could have done it for the Temple Theatre, — and I promptly told her. There! Of course, you are annoyed! Recognition of the mistake came to me afterward, — too late. It was very thoughtless, very stupid, idiotic! I confess all, and beg your pardon a thousand times."

"It does n't matter," said Ives, recovering from his annoyance and vexed with himself for showing any sign thereof, — "really, it does n't, in the least! The joke between Mrs. Middlecot and myself involved secrecy; but it was only a joke. Now that you have put me on my guard, I shall know how to deal with her."

"You forgive me, then?"

"Freely."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, — quite!"

Here broke in the voice of Mr. Middlecot, slightly raised for their benefit. "We will leave it to Miss Ashley, who is entirely unprejudiced," said he.

It appeared that between himself and Miss Orbitt a discussion had arisen concerning a certain marriage-engagement which had been abruptly broken by the lady three days after its formal proclamation to the world. Her reasons seemed to be indefinite, her lover was certainly in despair; and as the two were very well known, the incident, exciting much remark, had become a nine days' wonder. Mr. Middlecot, sitting in judgment, found the act of feminine inconstancy unpardonable; Miss Orbitt, as self-appointed champion of her sex, defended it. Miss Ashley, knowing neither of the *dramatis personæ*, was now called upon for an impartial opinion.

Mr. Middlecot endeavored to lay the case before her dispassionately in the fewest possible words; and Miss Orbitt acknowledged that his statement was a fair one. The verdict followed without a moment's hesitation.

"I think that the woman was much to blame," declared Miss Ashley.

"What!" Miss Orbitt objected. "For a change of heart which she could not help?"

"She should have helped it earlier."

"But, surely, you would n't have her marry the man, — now, would you?"

"Perhaps; but that is another question. She had no right to give the promise inconsiderately. Her behavior seems to me wholly inexcusable."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Mr. Middlecot. "'A Daniel come to judgment!' One after my own heart! Of course, Miss Orbitt is convinced now."

"Not a bit of it!" was Miss Orbitt's answer. "A woman's promise is given subject to her change of mind. This has always been her privilege, and it always will be. The thing is very simple; how can any rational man fail to understand it?"

"In one thing, at least, we shall all agree," said Staunton Ives; "the man in question is probably better off without the woman."

"Decidedly!" agreed Miss Ashley.

"Very much better!" Mr. Middlecot assented. "And the sooner he comes to that conclusion, the better for his peace of mind. Meanwhile —"

"Meanwhile," interposed Miss Orbitt, "should he consult me, — which, as I admit, is most unlikely, — I shall advise him to put his pride in his pocket and try his fate with his former fiancée again. If he is really miserable without her, that would do no harm. And it is by no means sure that her last word has been spoken. I would give them both the benefit of the doubt, — I, who am charitable."

"Charity, herself, could go no farther," said Mr. Middlecot; "when I need help, I shall retain you as an advocate."

"Don't!" retorted the best of all the Orbitts, with decisive severity. "I defend only the deserving!"

Their talk trickled away into smaller channels, one of which Ives and Miss Ashley now followed. They were practically alone together; since no seclusion, while it lasts, comes nearer to completeness than that of a well-ordered dinner-table, too large for general conversation. She took the opportunity to bring up the play again, and to compliment him upon his work, even quoting some phrases of it correctly. She found there a distinctive quality of which she knew the worth. For her father had once been a Latin professor, and in his years of retirement had occupied himself with translations from his favorite language. She had sometimes worked with him in pursuit of the elusive right word, and understood how hard to find it was.

All this had a sound sincerely appreciative. Partly because of that, partly to convince Miss Ashley that he bore her no malice for inadvertently revealing his open secret to Mrs. Middlecot, Ives now told her of his second play, — the original one, — soon to be produced anonymously. Miss Ashley thanked him for trusting her, wished success to the venture, pledged herself to personal interest in its fate. Then, drifting from the particular to the general, she deplored the rarity of such ventures as his, together with the spreading commercialism of their clime and age which tended to discourage artistic effort.

"We are alert enough, intelligent enough," she declared; "but our minds all turn the wrong way, — toward the almighty dollar, which looms so very large that we fail to see beyond its disk. We fly to make it ours, — that's our first thought, — by any small, ignoble means. More than England ever was, we are becoming a nation of shopkeepers. For what?"

"For something better in the end, no doubt," said Ives, hopefully; "even art itself, perhaps! Let us remember Florence under the Medici, and try to think that our present grievous state is only one of transition."

"With due gratitude to the present pioneers of art who push on through such discouragements," she urged.

"As well as to those who cheer and applaud them," he promptly appended.

Miss Ashley laughed. "Some degree of sympathy is needed in every new enterprise," she admitted. "I have discovered that in a small experiment of my own."

"Ah! and what is that?"

"I wanted to stir up the indifferent," she continued; "to interest them in something more than a mere hand-to-mouth existence. There are so many of that sort in the country! Those who have n't flown to the cities in pursuit of money are too apt to grovel. At least, it is so in my small community of Campfield. Well, I have started a club of native women there, trying to make them read the best books and to reëstablish forgotten village industries. One day, I found an old loom in a garret, and turned their thoughts to weaving. It has been a long story, — a hard struggle; but more than one loom is really doing good work there now."

"You are the true pioneer of the arts to cheer and applaud," said Ives. "Yet you leave all that behind, to become a good Bostonian."

"Ah, yes!" Miss Ashley returned, with a note of regret in her voice. "I yield to the divided duty, — forced into it, like others before me; but I don't mean to neglect Campfield altogether, for all that."

"Tell me of this experiment there, in detail. It interests me."

"Oh, I can give details by the hour together, — though not at the risk of boring you."

"They will not bore me," he assured her. "Go on, please!"

“Only in exchange for details of yours. You shall tell me, in return, the plot of your play.”

“Of course, nothing would please me better, but — ”

“Then it is a bargain.”

Their mutual confidence, beginning thus, in fulfillment of the bargain was prolonged, undisturbed, until the dinner’s end. Ives mentally reverted to her share of it, afterward, in the smoking-room, where, apparently a good listener, he was in fact preoccupied. His mind engaged itself now with formulating a first impression of Miss Ashley’s character. He found her unconventional, unaffected; intelligent, appreciative, sympathetic; high-spirited, too; above all, optimistic. Here was great insight for an hour’s time. What delightful qualities were these!

“Don’t you think so, Ives?” asked one of the men in his group of smokers.

“To be sure, I do! — Eh, what? What were you discussing?”

“Why, he has n’t heard a word of it!” rejoined his companion, laughing with the others; “and his cigar has gone out, too. No, don’t light up! We are going back among the women. What ’s the matter, man? Are you in love?”

“I wish I were!” he declared, laughing at his own confusion. “Your talk is too subtle for me, — that ’s all.”

In the drawing-room Mrs. Middlecot’s look invited him, and he sat beside her.

"You will be surprised to hear that I have won the bet," she began.

"To establish that question of authorship before me," he answered. "You worded it so, yourself. How, then, could you win?"

"Well, I call it off, for you were betting upon a certainty. True artist that you are, — in deception!"

"You forced me to treachery with extravagant praises. My only course was never to let you know."

"We are quits, then, since I have stolen a march upon you. And I will keep your secret, if such it can be called; but you were not surprised at all by my discovery. How did you know that I knew? Ah, I see, — *she* told you!"

Ives laughed. "Your senses are acute," said he.

"I thought you two were getting on famously for a first interview. Beware of her! She 's very dangerous. She has views."

"Has she, indeed? That 's terrible."

"These advanced young women are not to be trusted. I warn you!"

"Thanks; but I am encased in armor. I have become a hermit-crab, as Kelton says. You know Kelton? Yes, of course you do. He has your photograph, — a charming one."

Mrs. Middlecot rippled into laughter, low and musical. "So he has shown you that old thing," said she.

"No. I saw it in his rooms. My own are above his, and we are neighborly. He is my Mentor, my preceptor. As regards protection, you see, my heart could hardly be in better hands."

"I see," said Mrs. Middlecot, with mock solemnity; "and I withdraw all my warnings. You are strong in what the poets call the security of desolation. I congratulate you!"

She started up, sweeping behind her with a graceful gesture the folds of her silken train, — rose-color it was, of a delicate shade which she had always liked and still found courage to wear.

"It is time to make the move for the Turners' 'small-and-early,'" she said. "Good-night, — unless you are going on."

"No; I 'm not 'Turning.' Good-night to you."

Mrs. Middlecot glided away. Others, following her lead, broke up the party; but Miss Orbitt lingered, and Ives stayed with her. Then Mr. Ashley led him off into the library, behind the drawing-room, to look at a new book; detaining him there still further with instructions upon a matter of business, suddenly remembered. After this, Ives, catching sight of Miss Ashley's reflection in a long mirror between the windows, spoke of his pleasure at meeting her. The host's face lighted up.

"Yes," he said, "Dorothy is a good girl, — a fine girl. I have been trying for years to bring this about, and now it has come to pass. If it will only last! If she will only be content to make her home here with me!"

Ives, still intent upon the mirror, watched Dorothy, far off in the outer room, standing alone and smiling, — to herself, as it seemed. She wore silvery white, with a shoulder-knot of brilliant orange and a glistening ornament in her hair. He had a momentary fancy that all the light in the drawing-room came from her.

"She looks contented," said he, laughing.

"We can't be sure," returned Mr. Ashley, with a shake of the head to emphasize his doubt. "She has ideas! They are all very well, when you control them; but if they become fixed, and control *you*, — well, we shall see; we shall see."

They passed out into the drawing-room, where Miss Orbitt descended upon them in her wraps, muffled for departure. Ives made his own departure too, conducting Miss Orbitt down the steps to her carriage. Light streamed upon them from the house, and they saw Miss Ashley at the window, waving her farewells. As the carriage whirled off, she waved once more to Ives alone. Then she moved away, and again he fancied that all the light went with her.

"Even fixed ideas are not incurable," he thought, on his way home. "To lose them all, she need only fall in love. And she will soon be doing that, — but not with me; not with me!"

V

IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Behind the scenes at the Temple Theatre it had long been a current saying that, though Barney Bradish was a hard one to drive, when he once started, hell itself could not stop him. And Ives cheerfully reminded himself of this, upon seeing for the first time his new play "underlined," in theatrical phraseology, — announced in small type, that is, at the bottom of the programme for early performance. No date, to be sure, was mentioned; but since Barney had started, he must arrive in due course. Yet though all roads lead to Rome, the roads are not all straight. Moreover, Mr. Bradish's personality, apparently translucent, was in fact complex and subtle; and his new dramatist soon began to wonder whether the soft-spoken manager, having an end in view, did not habitually prefer to gain it by devious ways.

Dropping in at Barney's office one evening between the acts, Ives inquired casually how rehearsals of "The Loadstone," as his new play was called, were getting on; and it surprised him to be told with cheerful calmness that these had not even begun. Carefully avoiding any show of anxiety, he listened in some dismay to the manager's plausible explanation.

"There 's no hurry, of course," Bradish continued.

"This bill 's still a draw, — you 're in it, you know," and he emphasized the personal parenthesis with a pleasant smile; "then I may put on the new French melodrama next; they 're going to do it over in New York, I hear, — if so, I must cut in first, as a matter of business. Do you see?"

These were the easy-going days when the artless French dramatist, unprotected by copyright, printed his new play at once for general circulation, of which the sharp Yankee pirate-manager eagerly availed himself. Ives "saw"; and Mr. Bradish prattled on glibly.

"My stage-manager, Benson, has sat up nights, and made a translation that 's really admirable; you 'll see. It 's a heavy two-hour piece, playing all the evening with the waits. Of course, yours hangs over. We mean to do it, though."

"You really like it, then?" said the helpless author, beginning to fear that his poor little "Loadstone" might never see the light at all.

"Yes," returned Bradish, temperately. "As I said before, it 's creditable, — highly creditable. It will go, I think. The parts are all good, — especially the lead."

The author's hope revived again. "Yes," he said, thinking aloud without restraint, "having Jarvis in mind, I did all I could for that."

Mr. Bradish coughed. "Quite so!" he declared. "Look in often, won't you! Any evening, when I 'm not busy, — always glad to see you!" And upon this broad hint, the interview closed, somewhat prematurely.

Weeks passed. The melodrama came and flourished, despite the hastily prepared translation which, far from admirable, was justly branded by the critics as crude and inadequate. Meanwhile, "The Loadstone" remained still underlined, but also undated, in type that seemed to diminish with every new impression.

One day, John Ashley called Ives into his private office. "I hear you translated the comedy which Jarvis has been giving us, —'Love-in-Idleness,'" said he.

"Yes," acknowledged Ives, bracing himself for disapproval.

"I congratulate you," said Mr. Ashley. "The work does you infinite credit."

And Ives, with a word of thanks, returned to his desk, inwardly blessing the chief for his liberal view of a private enterprise so far removed from their common business interests.

That very afternoon on his way home Ives saw a new poster at the theatre doors. To his surprise, the last ten nights of the great melodrama were announced in flaming letters. As he stopped to read them, Bradish came out upon him with open arms. The florid manager was in his most genial mood.

"Just the man I want to see!" he cried, cordially. "Come in! I was on the point of writing to you."

Taking Ives by the arm, he drew him into his private office, where he turned on the lights, unlocked his desk with much jingling of keys, and flung it open. "Sit down!" he insisted. "I'm putting on 'The Loadstone,'—that's all; for Monday week. Here's the announcement I've drawn up for the morning papers."

"What! over my name?" said Ives, startled at its prominence in large capitals.

"Of course," rejoined Bradish, quickly; "as a 'draw,' in view of your success. A good 'ad' for us! No objection, is there?"

But for Mr. Ashley's favorable comment, Ives, certainly, would have hesitated,—probably, indeed, he would have decided to suppress the name. Even now, the sudden plunge into publicity made him wince. After a moment's thought, however, he said:—

"No. There is no objection. Let it stand."

"Ah! That's all right, then!"

"Have you rehearsed the play?" Ives asked.

"Yes; all the week. It's going famously. Here's the cast!"

He handed over the slip of paper in very casual fashion, as if it were of no importance, but while Ives studied it he watched him intently.

The author's face lengthened with disappointment. In the cast, the principal part stood assigned to a minor actor, and the name of Jarvis did not appear at all.

"How is this?" he stammered; "Mackenzie in the lead?"

"To be sure!" replied Bradish, cheerfully. "Right in his line, too. The part fits him like a glove."

"But it was written for Jarvis. I counted upon him."

"Sorry; but he 's out of the question, — he 's overworked," Bradish fluently resumed. "Jarvis has the whole burden of the second piece, — the *pièce de résistance*, you see. And between ourselves, you know, yours is too slight a part for Jarvis. You understand that."

"I understood from you that all the parts were excellent, — especially that one."

"So it is, my dear boy, excellent, — an excellent little part, but light, light for Jarvis. In your next piece you 'll do better and we 'll do better for you."

"I hope so," said Ives; but he said it hopelessly; and, feeling that to stem the current longer was impossible, he rose to take leave.

"Going?" asked the dictator, in the best of humors. "Well, call in whenever you feel like it, with any suggestions you have to offer. We 're going to make this new bill a notable success. Jarvis surpasses himself in his part; you 'll be delighted with it. I look for a long run."

Ives bade him good-night, and went away disheartened. "A neat touch that!" he muttered, "to crack up Jarvis, — in the other play. He looks for a long run; and I may look for dead failure so far as 'The Loadstone' is concerned. Without Jarvis, it will be nothing." However, he was powerless in the matter, and reconciled himself little by little to making the best of it. After all, his play would have a hearing, at least. There was cause for congratulation in that.

This happier view was confirmed by Humphrey Kelton, who happened to be at home when Ives came up the stairs a few moments later and stopped impulsively to impart his grievance. That sagacious counselor hearkened in a cloud of smoke to its recital and from the fumes emitted oracular judgment.

"A play is no play, unless it be played!" he declared; "to withdraw the manuscript, as of course you might do, would avail you nothing. In a quarrel with Barney Bradish you have everything to lose. Let the iniquitous work proceed, say no word, — but remember. Next time, make all your points in a contract beforehand, and score as many of them as you can. You are learning your lesson, my child; profit by it!"

The advice was sound, as Ives agreed. Then, withdrawing from the subject, he took up a book that lay on the table between them. It was an old copy of Ovid's "Metamorphoses," handsomely bound, with an English prose translation accompanying the Latin text. Ives read the title-page aloud in a tone of surprise.

"Ovid, yes!" said Kelton, answering the implied question. "I like him best of all the Latins. He wears well: —

'Tempora labuntur tacitisque senescimus annis,'

Who has beaten that? — but thereby hangs a tale. The copy was mine once. John Ashley bought it long ago at a sale, and I found it in his library the other evening when I dined with him. He insisted upon my borrowing the book. Odd, is n't it, that the chicken should come home to roost?"

"Not half so odd as that you should be dining with John Ashley. Was the club closed, that you deserted it?"

Kelton laughed. "An exception, proving the rule, my boy! I met Ashley almost at his door. It was a Sunday evening, and he had no one else. Except for a half-decanter of Madeira, bottled *consule Planco*, we were quite alone."

"Without Miss Ashley, then?"

"Miss Ashley? Oh, his niece, you mean. She was away at some festivity, and came in just as I was going,—late, with the Ovid. A nice, old-fashioned sort of girl with no nonsense about her, if I am any judge. Good-looking, too!"

Ives laughed in his turn. "What! you really noticed her!" said he. "How did that happen? She must read Ovid."

"She does, and she knows it, too. When I quoted, she capped the verse. Think of that in these degenerate days! She is to live under her uncle's roof, as I am sorry to hear."

"Sorry; why?"

"He should have let well enough alone. Her head will be turned before the winter is over."

"Indeed? Pray, why do you fear that?"

"Because," gravely expounded Kelton, laying down his pipe,—"because the world is too much with her in

John Ashley's household. Among you all, she will be petted, flattered, — spoiled. She is only a woman, and they are feeble, vain things at best. That is why!"

"Too bad, isn't it!" said Ives, derisively, as he turned to go; "yet with her good sense and knowledge of the Latin poets she may pull through. At any rate, let us hope so! That, I suppose, is all we can do for her, you and I."

Kelton growled, and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, — and more 's the pity, too!" he rejoined.

A small part of this conversation — namely, that relating to his play — Ives repeated to Miss Ashley, when he called to see her on the next of her weekly afternoons at home. Strictly speaking, he did not owe her a visit; but as his name was now billed about the streets, he wished to explain the sudden disclosure following hard upon his declared intention to remain anonymous. Purposely arriving late, he found her alone; and, introducing the subject at once, he quoted Kelton's advice, word for word, as closely as possible. She approved the force of it, but laughed heartily over its direct expression.

"That sounds like him," she remarked. "So the play is really to be given on Monday evening. I can hardly wait so long."

"You are going?" he asked.

"Going? Of course I am. See!" and she pointed at her engagement calendar on which "*Play*" stood underscored against the date.

"Ah! That 's very good of you."

"Not a bit of it! For me it will be an event, too important to lose. And you will be there, too, — behind the scenes, I suppose, waiting for your call."

"Heaven forbid that I should wait for what may never come! I shall be there, but in a dark corner of the gallery, alone, out of sight. I wish I could say also, out of mind."

"Alone, in the gallery. What a dreary prospect!"

"It is the only way for me. My misery does not love company. As the day draws near I shiver at the whole dreadful business, — an ingenious form of torture, with all the world looking on."

Miss Ashley reflected. "I never considered that side of it," she said, soberly. Then, brightening again, she added: "Well, be sure to sit in the back row of the gallery, very near the head of the stairs."

"To run away, when the curtain rises?" Ives asked, with a smile.

"No; to hurry down before the footlights, when it falls and we insist upon your triumph. Promise!"

"I will," said he; "if only to be reminded of your cheerful thought."

Then, over the tea-table, they turned to other subjects, coming back at last to that of Humphrey Kelton, whom Miss Ashley found interesting in his eccentricity.

"He is a man of such surprises!" she declared. "When I watched him that night at Miss Colt's, I thought he was an odious old bear; but here, with Uncle John, all his shagginess seemed to be upon the surface. He talked so wisely and so wittily, with no more bitterness than was — what shall I say? — bearable!"

"Ah!" said Ives, laughing. "He was entirely comfortable, and he liked his company; he told me so. You saw him at his very best, undoubtedly. That is wonderful. Even his worst is amusing to me. I like him, and accept it with due mental allowance; but —"

"But?"

"It is not so with others. Those to whom he is indifferent, or whom he dislikes, he antagonizes fatally. Even among men, at his club, their numbers increase every day. When the world crosses his path, he cannot treat it decently. He will make no concessions. Holding himself persistently aloof, he has lost the habit of taking pains."

"I see. The remedy, then, is to decoy him out into the world."

"Don't try it!" said Ives. "You might succeed, and if you did he would never forgive you."

"But it's too bad!" Miss Ashley urged, "for him, and for us all. What can have turned him so against us?"

"It's the nature of the animal, probably; but I have heard dark hints of some old love-affair that went wrong."

"Oh! That, indeed!" Upon which Miss Ashley grew grave and thoughtful, and a silence fell between them; until Ives discovered that a whole hour had slipped away in her companionship; then he started up.

"'Too late I stayed! Forgive the crime!'" he quoted. "You know that charming poem. Good-night!"

"Until Monday evening, at the latest!" she replied; but he doubted this, assuring her that she was unlikely to see him then, whatever happened.

"Why is it that she is so much more agreeable than any of the others?" he asked himself, on the way home. "I think it is because she never stops to consider what impression she is making. That does not concern her for a moment. She considers herself last, always." A conclusion which seemed to involve no sadness; yet, unconsciously, he sighed.

The important night found him among the first to arrive at the theatre, assailed by a nervous tremor which had been gathering strength for days, — days when he avoided companionship, and walked alone after dark, fancying himself, even then, a marked man. He had seen no rehearsals; had exchanged no further words with Bradish, whom he would not seek out now; but, stealing up at once into the dim gallery, he eyed his programme askance, and watched furtively the duller portion of the audience as it slowly assembled. Then, in counting the interminable minutes, he became so restless that he descended to hang upon the outskirts of the stalls, where he dodged adroitly every familiar face that approached. These, however, were strangely few, though the house filled up fast with a mass of spectators who had no distinction for him, — the idle, indifferent, unlettered public, no more. Feverishly now he reproached himself for not making capital out of his friends by personal solicitation, to urge the commercial value of their presence, — a course, which in a saner moment he would have stigmatized as undignified and unworthy. It seemed curious — nay, hard, very hard he thought it — that more of his own sort had not taken the trouble to come of their own accord. Even Miss Ashley, herself, must have failed him. At least, he was sure that she had not yet arrived.

The orchestra began its prelude; the lights flared up; the warning bell rang; and still she did not come. Ives returned despondently to his gallery-seat, — in the back row, which he had almost to himself, — near the head of the stairs. Already they were talking upon the stage, but, for some time, their speech was inaudible where he sat. Then, at last, he caught a phrase of it; another, too, a line upon which he had counted for effect. It made none whatever; yet now the house was still as death, and every word came up to him distinctly. "The brutes!" he muttered, as the silence, prolonging itself, grew insupportable; "are they all asleep?" Suddenly, at a retort, more than trivial, as now it seemed to him, a ripple of laughter spread through the stalls. Never was sound more welcome. The gallery stirred, woke up, in time to applaud the entrance of the heroine who happened to be a favorite; and the ice, thus broken, did not form again. Thenceforward, while the act proceeded, each new scene of it provoked some response, — mild, it is true, and most capriciously bestowed, rarely in the proper place. To the author's expectant ear, the unexpected recurred continually. His best lines either overshot the mark, or fell short, never reaching it at all.

The first act closed with a definite "situation," — that ingenious moment of suspense which the dramatic adepts declare then to be essential; and this drew out a round of faint, sporadic applause, that appeared, oddly enough, to start and end in the gallery. Ives dropped back in his place exhausted, as his neighbors, filing past him, went out for the interval. All were silent; but had they indulged in critical remarks he could not have listened. What must they think of it, since now he found his own work flat beyond expression? Talk, talk, talk, and nothing else! Mackenzie with such a burden was sadly overweighted; the others had floundered painfully; but the fault lay all with him. An idea there certainly was, but in unfolding it he had misjudged his strength. The fact of the applause remained. Applause, alas! so slight as almost to seem compassionate! Yet, even now, his second act might work salvation; its last scene, especially. If only Jarvis were dealing with it! He could only wait, and hope, — out in the air, not here. He hurried down into the street, striving to cheer himself with a familiar Latin proverb. *Finis coronat opus!* he whispered repeatedly.

It would not do. The night wind chilled, without reviving him. Opposite, a barroom window shone invitingly. He crossed to it, went in, and called for whiskey. As glass and bottle were set down, two middle-aged men, shabbily dressed, brushed by into the vacant place beside him, nodding to the barkeeper. Ives recognized their faces, with a start; but they were strangers; he had seen them in the gallery a moment before, that was all. They were old theatregoers obviously, perhaps wisely critical.

"How 's the show?" the barkeeper inquired of them, familiarly.

"It ain't worth a damn!" said one.

"Right he is!" confirmed the other. "It 's — "

Ives drew back, without waiting to hear more. He gulped down his drink, and fled, almost forgetting payment in the mad necessity of escape.

His impulse was to cut short his agony then and there by a homeward flight; but, after a few turns up and down the empty, wind-swept street, he conquered that, a grim craving to know the worst at once getting the upper hand. He would see the thing out. He was learning his lesson, as Kelton had said, and must learn it thoroughly. He thought of Kelton for the first time that night on the way up, and forgave him for deliberately absenting himself from that human sacrifice. Kelton need only know the outcome, not the details. He, the victim, wanted no weak commiseration of the actual moment. To be alone, unseen, unrecognized, was best!

How the act went he could not remember afterward. He studied the audience, which remained severe in its attention, cool and far too tranquil for comfort if not absolutely bored; noting every restless movement, every sign of intermittent appreciation. Toward the end these happier signs became more frequent. The closing scene was really rousing them, as he had hoped. Suddenly, the curtain fell, cutting all short abruptly at the strongest moment. There followed a moment of silence,—utter silence. Then applause broke out above, below, and the poor victim's heart beat as though it would burst. The round was well sustained by the gallery,—particularly, as it appeared, by one corner of it, lower down, near the front; but this glorious reward of labor ran a brief course, faltered, declined. An effort at revival from the same friendly corner failed dismally; the house tacitly refused to take it up, but, on all sides, shuffled out into the aisles, the open air. All was over. The author had not been called.

For a few moments Ives sat motionless, benumbed, subdued by a chilling sense of inefficiency. To this succeeded a flush of indignation, due less to the pitiable result itself than to his own obtuseness in not forecasting it. He knew now that he had juggled with his perceptive faculties, despite all assertions to the contrary, mental and otherwise, secretly hoping for something better, if not for overwhelming success. The knowledge suddenly made the brilliant, buzzing theatre into which he stared the most distasteful place on earth. The lights blinded him, the music was horribly discordant. He must get out of it at once; crawl away, while he could, obscurely. He caught up his hat and overcoat from the seat beside him; and, at the same instant, felt the pressure of a hand lightly laid upon his shoulder.

He turned with a start. It was Miss Colt who had touched him. Behind her stood Dorothy Ashley.

He struggled round to them, made an awkward grimace, half comic, half pathetic, and shook hands; noting as he did so that their gloves were torn across. Miss Colt's, indeed, hung in shreds from both hands.

"You knew where to find me," he said, mournfully. "Thank you for coming up, — but — "

"We did n't have to come up," interrupted Miss Colt, gleefully; "we were with you all along. Our seats are over there." And she indicated that part of the gallery which had been the head and front of his applause. Ives looked at their battered hands, and understood, but could not speak.

"We had to come early for them," Miss Colt continued; "but the gallery, you know, is altogether the best place — to see — "

"And to be of service!" broke in the unhappy author, suddenly finding speech. "Thank you again, and all the more. If that dead thing could have been galvanized into life, you two would have done it!"

"Oh, my dear, it 's not so bad as that!" Miss Colt assured him. "The house was horribly cold, of course. These first-nighters! They just sit up straight to criticize, — I know 'em! But it went, all the same."

"Yes, indeed!" declared her companion. "It was all interesting, — most interesting. The dialogue — "

"Oh, the dialogue!" echoed Ives. "The house was quite right. It won't do; the thing is worthless."

Miss Ashley knit her brows in a look of distress. "No!" she urged; "don't say that. I can't and won't believe it."

"You 're no judge!" Miss Colt put in as a lenitive.

"And you are friendly, — too friendly," he replied. "It was more than kind of you, though, to do this, — and to — to take this view. Good-night!"

"You are not going!" cried both at once.

"Yes. It is best for me to get out." He shook hands once more, smiling, this time, at the torn gloves. "Most generous of applauders!" said he.

"But you will come again," insisted Miss Colt; "to watch another house, — a better one."

He shook his head.

"You must!" said Dorothy Ashley.

"Perhaps; when the papers have spoken." And, having conceded so much, he hurried away.

Examination of the newspapers, the next morning, was not the least of his trials. They protested, alas! too little rather than too much; some, indeed, making no allusion whatever either to him or to his work; all, however, lavishing unqualified praise upon the comedy and Jarvis. The inference was plain. That part of the programme, in its success genuine, triumphant even, had come by way of compensation for the other, — a form of severity which proved harrowing beyond measure. Violent abuse would have been easier to bear; or, at least, to Ives it seemed so. A long letter from Miss Ashley, designed to encourage him, failed at first of its effect. Outrageously cheerful he called it, and thus described it in his reply. He would not be cheered; yet, while the performances lasted, he was irresistibly drawn to the theatre more than once to study that other and better house which Miss Colt had promised him. The result was disquieting. Different the houses certainly were, swaying capriciously this way and that, but all alike in their dominant note of indifference, — lukewarm was the only word for it. He hung upon their outskirts, carefully avoiding any encounter with Barney Bradish, in no mood to endure his agreeable platitudes.

On Friday (fateful day) Jove raised his arm to discharge his thunderbolt. There came a pleasant note from Mr. Bradish, informing Ives that it now seemed best to withdraw "The Loadstone," temporarily, of course; not because of any defect in its graceful lines, but merely that these were too delicate to conform to the coarser ones of the comedy. It would go better with something else, and its author should have an opportunity of approving the managerial judgment at an early revival. The present unavoidable recourse to the shelf was by no means to be construed into disapprobation of his "admirable little play." So this quietly dropped from the bill, and another prelude of stouter fibre and well-tested fitness as quietly took its place. When the curious asked questions, Ives parried them, giving the fatal issue the advantage of a doubt. Death at the executioner's hands came easily, obscurely; but death it proved to be, none the less; since this was the end of "The Loadstone" for all time.

VI

FLICKERING FIRES

One afternoon, leaving his work at the office somewhat earlier than usual, Staunton Ives suddenly resolved to call on Mr. Jarvis. Upon a previous visit he had not been fortunate enough to find the actor at home; indeed, except for a few hurried words behind the scenes, the two had not talked together since their first meeting and parting over Miss Colt's dinner-table. This was a favorable hour, and Ives, improving it, caught the comedian alone by his fire, ruminating in a cloud of tobacco-smoke. After a cordial welcome, which put his visitor upon the instant mentally at ease, Jarvis installed him with a pipe in the other armchair, and began to recall pleasantly the dawn of their acquaintance in this very room. Miss Colt was a merry soul who always would have her little joke. He called her, sometimes, the old lady with the young heart; yet that hardly applied, since she positively refused to grow old. Of course, the guest had been quite unaware of the trick she had played upon them. Ah! It had all been explained to him, afterward, and by the "understudy," herself? He knew Miss Ashley, then! She was a remarkable girl, very remarkable; in fact, he could think of no descriptive word good enough for her. She made new friends, every day, as he was told, at her uncle's house; yet the old ones were not thrown over. Only yesterday, she had brought him that rose, there, in the glass. They had become intimate — he liked to think and speak that word — through her visits at Goff Canterbury's.

Ives bent instinctively to inhale the fragrance of the crimson flower slowly unfolding its petals on the table beside him. Then he caught at the actor's cue, and inquired if Mr. Canterbury, who seemed to be an interesting figure, were well and at work.

"Oh, yes; hard at it!" Jarvis replied. "Your true artist — and Goff is one — can never be happy out of his workshop. Just now, he is having the time of his life there. Some rich woman, bless her heart! has given him a royal commission; *carte blanche* to do his best and damn the expense. The wind never struck him before in that quarter. Lois — that 's his wife — says he has n't been so happy since his wedding-day."

"His wife? What is she like?"

Mr. Jarvis extended both hands to signify size and rotundity. "Like that!" said he. "Good soul! but she does n't understand Goff, — never did. When men marry, like does n't meet like, but the most unlikely. You 're not married, are you?"

"No!" said Ives, laughing. "In the great lottery, my turn to draw has not yet come."

Echoing the laugh, Mr. Jarvis refilled his pipe; then sighed. "Well! Heaven 's above all, as Cassio says," he commented. "To draw a blank — like mine —

is best, perhaps, for working men. What should I do with a wife? or, rather, what would a wife do with me? Think of my day and night!"

He recounted in detail the routine of his daily life, beginning querulously and ending with a smile at his own bitterness. After all, it was his life, he knew no other; old dogs were best at old tricks, which had their compensations. Applause, now, cheered him more than meat and drink; when he failed to "get a hand," he should starve. Hand to mouth, as one might say, it was with him!

So he passed on to general gossip of the stage, brightened with bits of personal experience. The talk, turned into its natural channel, flowed along in pleasant monologue for half an hour. The appreciative listener would have welcomed from this high source some word, consoling or otherwise, concerning the withdrawal of his play. None came, however; the subject was avoided carefully, even artfully, as it seemed to him. "A question of tact!" he thought; "the victim, naturally, must speak first."

To think thus was to speak at the first convenient opportunity, — to make the opportunity, should none present itself. Accordingly, when he rose to take leave, Ives dragged in the play by the heels, calling it a flat failure.

"Hardly that," Jarvis returned, with gentle gravity. "Put it at what the French describe as a *succès d'estime.*"

"That is failure!" retorted Ives. "With you in the part, all might have been different. I shall never forgive Bradish for that piece of treachery."

The cue was not taken up. Jarvis met this speech only with chilling silence, while Ives, surprised and disconcerted, did the only thing possible,— namely, to hasten his departure. The actor, as they shook hands, courteously thanked him for his visit and hoped that he would come again. Ives turned toward the door.

"One word!" called Jarvis, in a clear, incisive tone, which checked his visitor's flight. Laying down his pipe, he moved nearer and continued with deliberation: "I think I ought to tell you, and I will. Don't blame Bradish for that, — he has enough to answer for, in all conscience. I did it, not he."

"You mean that you declined to play the part?" said Ives, faintly.

"Precisely; exercising a privilege of which, sometimes, I avail myself. I could not see my points in it. There were too many words, with too little action. Your man talked, but he did nothing; salt would n't have saved him."

"I see," Ives assented, with a forced smile.

"I felt bound to explain this. It was only fair to Bradish, to myself, — to you."

"I am glad that you did. I am very much obliged to you."

They shook hands once more, and Mr. Jarvis followed him to the street door urging a repetition of the visit.

"Don't call this a discouragement; call it a lesson," he said, by way of final parting. “You are sure to do better next time, if you have it in you.”

Ives walked slowly away, with these last words drumming in his ears like a refrain. “If I have it in me, — if I have it in me!” he repeated. “Well, I have n’t it in me. Better to admit that now than later.”

He turned the corner, and found himself face to face with his friend Mrs. Middlecot, who was on foot, and alone. She stopped short, startled by the unexpected meeting.

“Why, what are you doing here?” she demanded.

“And you?” he rejoined.

“Oh, I am on my way to the most exciting place in the whole world, which I should like so much to show you. Come with me!”

“With rapture. Where?”

“To the workshop of an artist, — a wonderful creature who makes globes, as no one else can.”

“Goff Canterbury!”

“What! You know him?” said Mrs. Middlecot, in such a tone of disappointment that Ives laughed and promptly reassured her.

“I know him, — not his work, which I shall be most glad to see, unless he should find me in the way.”

“On the contrary, he will gladly give you that experience. He is making a pair of globes for me, and I have an appointment with him.”

“Then you are the royal lady of the *carte blanche* commission. Bless your heart! as Jarvis says.”

Mrs. Middlecot laughed. "Has Mr. Jarvis been telling you tales out of school? Don't repeat them. The globes are intended as a surprise to my husband. I swear you to secrecy."

She led the way across Gibbon Place into the narrow defile beyond it, stepping cautiously over the rough pavement, until, halfway down, they reached the threshold of a door at which she rang. After a moment the door swung open; and Ives followed her through the confusion of the lower room up the staircase to the well-ordered second floor, where Mr. Canterbury in working-clothes welcomed his distinguished patroness cordially.

"I have brought Mr. Ives with me," she explained; "you know Mr. Ives."

"Yes, I know Mr. Ives," assented the globe-maker, but with a look so contradictory to the words, that Ives hastened to establish himself.

"We met at Miss Colt's one Sunday evening," he said; "after dinner, — with Mr. Jarvis."

Mr. Canterbury floundered helplessly. "Did we?" he asked. "So we did! Now, I remember; it was the night — the night —" Here he had plunged so deep that speech failed him.

"That globe must be one of mine!" cried Mrs. Middlecot, coming to the rescue. "I am sure it is!"

"Yes," said Mr. Canterbury, brightening. "Let me give you a better light. So! a little nearer, please."

It was a large celestial globe, reproducing as closely as possible Mr. Canterbury's own, which Mrs. Middlecot had admired upon her first visit to the house. He had copied the old maps, much to her satisfaction, which she now expressed, as they were silently displayed to the best advantage. She drew the attention of Ives to their fine points, and congratulated the craftsman upon his finished piece of work.

"Not quite finished," he explained, taking the word in its more literal sense. "There is the mounting still, — the stand, the circle, — they are all ready; but then there 's the varnishing, too. Tell me," — he hesitated, with an anxious look; "tell me! You don't insist on copal varnish?"

"Not if you disapprove of it," she replied, graciously. "I am content to leave all that to you."

"Ah! That 's better!" he returned, flushing with pleasure. "Copal, you see, takes the yellow tone too soon. I would rather let time tint my work in its own colors. Now, we shall get on with this. The other 's not so far advanced. I have designed those maps, myself. Some are ready; let me show them to you."

They went over to the glass table, where Mr. Canterbury first produced his studies in modification of an early style — the best, he said — to present needs; then, several of the results. Taken altogether, when fitted and applied, they would form a terrestrial globe, on a grand scale, as in his judgment it ought to be, — that is, as nearly perfect as he knew how to make it. After these technicalities, Mrs. Middlecot, tactfully bringing her companion to the front, suggested a round of the workshop for his benefit. It was all new to Mr. Ives, she said; and at all he marveled not only very properly, but with unfeigned enjoyment.

"Splendid work,—the work of an artist!" he declared; and a responsive gleam in Mr. Canterbury's eyes denoted his gratification.

"We call it an art," said he; "though, of course, it is a minor one; but I am fit for nothing else. My consolation is that doing small things well makes them worth while. One *must* do them well, with all one's heart and soul. There's no halfway. You may be Prince of Monaco or Duke of Saxe-Gotha, if you please, but not the lord-lieutenant!"

They all laughed at this, but the words impressed Ives profoundly. For the second time that afternoon the message of a master fell, unexpectedly, upon the tyro's ear, and struck home.

"Remember me to Mrs. Canterbury, please," said Mrs. Middlecot, as with reiterated thanks they turned to go.

"God bless my soul, I quite forgot!" exclaimed the adept in a minor art. "She wants you to come in for a cup of tea; you must,—and Mr. Ives, too."

Mrs. Middlecot accepted the invitation with alacrity. It would be delightful; she was just longing for tea; and then Mr. Ives could see the Copley!

"This way—this way!" cried Mr. Canterbury, nearly pitching headlong down the stairs in his excitement. "What was I thinking of? Lois would have played the mischief with me, if I had let you get off so."

He led them through dark and daylight into the house, within sight of the drawing-room door which stood open. In the distance his wife could be discerned at her post behind the hospitable urn. Then, as they advanced, he quietly retreated without further excuse.

Stirred by the sound of rustling garments, Mrs. Canterbury rose and seemed to be wafted across the room without volition, so lightly did she come. Having arrived, she dropped her curtsy with a warm greeting for Mrs. Middlecot.

"I have brought Mr. Ives," hastily explained that lady. "He came with me, — to see my globes, you know. He 's an old friend of mine."

"Very glad, I 'm sure!" said Mrs. Canterbury, dropping another curtsy, more formal and deliberate than the first.

"I ought to have prepared him!" thought Mrs. Middlecot, thankful that he bore the shock gallantly with no apparent surprise. "He 's a friend of Miss Ashley, too," she pursued, aloud.

Mrs. Canterbury beamed, as if to make her assurance of welcome double sure. Then she inspected him with a searching look. "So you 're one of Dorothy's young men," she said; "I hear about you! I only hope you all appreciate her."

"We do our best," he answered, smiling.

Mrs. Canterbury's expression implied that the best by no means realized her hopes. "Dorothy Ashleys are not born every day," she said, oracularly. Then, dismissing the subject as one beyond his comprehension, she turned again to Mrs. Middlecot. "Do sit down! That's the chair, by the fire! You must be worn out with standing so long in that stuffy shop. It's a wonder that you're here at all. When my husband begins about his work, he just runs on. Cream and sugar?" she asked, pouring the tea.

"But it's all so interesting," said Mrs. Middlecot, as Ives passed the cup. "An experience, is n't it, Mr. Ives? Pray, look at the old globe in the corner before you sit down; that gave me my idea."

Ives, obeying, murmured his approbation.

"Does he make 'em?" inquired Mrs. Canterbury, in an audible aside. "Oh!" she continued, upon Mrs. Middlecot's smiling negative. "I thought, perhaps, he was mixed up in it, somehow. I don't understand 'em, myself."

"No more do I!" said Ives, by the confession making a perceptible advance in her favor.

"Cream?" she asked with a friendly intonation, as he came back to the tea-table. "And sugar? What is it you do, then? I'm sure there's something."

"No, nothing!" he returned, with a laugh. "I am a cipher."

"Mercy!" cried his hostess, with a joyful chuckle. "Then we're a pair of us! Sit right down here by me,—you're such a comfort! They all do things nowadays, and they want you to know it."

"Mr. Ives is very modest," laughed Mrs. Middlecot; "if he won't admit doing fine things, he likes to see them, all the same. Don't let him turn his back upon the Copley, please."

He wheeled about and was introduced to the portrait of Miss Prime, which he silently admired, while Mrs. Canterbury furnished him with details of the family history.

"It is superb," he remarked, when she stopped to take breath. "What a joy it must be to live every day with a thing like that!"

The picture was, in fact, a particularly fine example of the painter's early manner, done before he went to England, foreshadowing all the ease and softness there acquired. Moreover, time had spared the work, which still looked fresh, unfaded. The girlish figure, if too thin for perfect beauty, was lifelike, glowing with color in the waning afternoon light. Its graceful pose seemed unaffected; the details of her China-silk gown, the rose in her hand, the mahogany table, upon which she leaned, were treated with the utmost care. Ives commented upon them, one by one; as he spoke, the fire flashed up, and Copley's table appeared to reflect the flame in its polished surface.

"See!" he cried. "That's the real thing!"

"No," said Mrs. Canterbury, rapping upon her own tea-table, as if she were calling him to order. "Here's the very one, I do believe. It's a Prime table, you may be sure of that. My grandmother owned it."

This gave further opportunity for her to talk, for him to listen. When the call was over, she looked upon him as an old acquaintance; thanked Mrs.

Middlecot for bringing him, and hoped he would come again, if he felt like it.

“We ’re a pretty pair of us, you know; don’t forget that!” was her last reminder, as she sank and rose again lightly yet majestically, like some full-rigged ship in a ground-swell.

Evidently, he had made an impression, upon which his companion bantered him gleefully, as they started up the hill together. Little by little, however, she lapsed into silence, in which he detected signs of constraint, till he began to think that Mrs. Middlecot must have something on her mind.

“By the way,” she resumed at last, “I have a favor to ask of you.” She strove to make her tone a light one, but something in it warned him not to commit himself too readily.

“What is it?” he inquired. “I will grant it, if I can.”

“You live in the same house with Mr. Kelton, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied, wondering at the question too much to say more.

“And you have seen in his rooms an old likeness of me, — you said so. A photograph, in a silver frame; I want to have it back.”

“Why not ask him for it?” suggested Ives, in a weak attempt to preclude what must be coming next.

“Because he would refuse, and I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. You know the kind of man he is, — he would put me off with a joke. Of course, it *is* a joke; his having the picture, or not, is n't really of the least importance now. Yet I think the joke has lasted long enough, and I want it to end with the laugh on my side. My idea is to have the photograph disappear mysteriously, — to fly off into space; do you see? Now, will you help me?"

"I?" he demanded, merely to gain time.

"Yes," she urged, so beset with her idea that she failed to perceive his growing discomfort. "Could n't you bribe the janitor to make off with it?"

"That might be done," he admitted, speaking very deliberately, as though he were weighing the matter; "but there are objections to such a plan; a better one, perhaps, may suggest itself."

"There 's the best of all, — to make off with it, yourself," declared Mrs. Middlecot, quickly. "None could be better than that; you must have so many opportunities."

"Yes; I might easily steal it, I suppose; but — "

"He would never suspect you, you know!" she interposed, as though that assurance did away with all possible difficulties.

He saw at once that she recognized neither the unsoundness of her casuistry, nor the fact that her small favor was one which, reasonably, he might be disinclined to grant. He had already determined not to grant it, but wished to avoid, if he could do so, a direct refusal.

"That plan, too, has some objections," he went on, with the same deliberation. "Let me think it over for a while, — consider it in all its bearings and invent something better if I can. That is, supposing you to be in no immediate hurry — "

" Oh, no, there 's no hurry, — not the slightest ! He has kept it so long that he may keep it a little longer. I leave all to you. Watch for the right moment, and let it melt into thin air when the time comes ; that 's all. It will be such a joke ! "

" Yes ; a capital joke."

" Thank you so much ! " said Mrs. Middlecot, taking the deed and his share in it for granted. " I am more obliged to you than I can say."

" Oh, as to that, there will be time enough later," he returned, disliking her view of the matter, yet temporizing with it still.

So far as he could see, he had merely postponed an evil day, without effacing it from the calendar ; but their conversation now glided on pleasantly to other things, and he let the case stand, cheering himself with the thought that he had really agreed to nothing. He would make his negative a written one, with full explanations, when the final issue should be forced upon him ; that course, on the whole, seemed easier.

The afternoon had given him much to consider deeply. And, strangely enough, through all his meditations flitted the unseen presence of Dorothy Ashley. To be sure, he had found her rose beside him on the actor's table ; and there had been talk of her in both the houses, — talk which had drifted that way very naturally, with no help from him. Sitting late that night over the gray embers in his fireplace he recalled every syllable of it, — unaccountably. She made many friends, of course ; how could she help that ? And he was one of them ; no more.

He rose, and paced the room back and forth many times in a restless round ; then, stopping at his writing-table, he drew out some loose sheets of manuscript, the opening scenes of a new comedy, roughly jotted down. He read them twice over, and shook his head.

" It will not do ! " he thought ; " and I can do no better. I have n't it in me."

Going back to the hearth, he raked apart the ashes. A few live coals were left, and he thrust his unfinished work among them. The white leaves writhed and quivered, turning from brown to black while he watched them grimly. At last, the flame leaped up.

" Not the lord-lieutenant ! " he muttered, laughing, when all was done.

VII

DOROTHY'S YOUNG MEN

"No church to-day, Uncle John?" inquired Miss Ashley, glancing through the open doorway of the library to take leave of the head of the house with a question, lightly put, of which she already knew the answer.

He lowered the page of his newspaper, and looked up at her with laughing eyes. "Not this morning, thank you! The Turf Club lures me, and I yield. I am due out there at twelve."

Then as he dropped his paper in a heap and turned to stir the fire, Dorothy lingered with him for a few moments, coming on into the room and standing meditatively in its sunny window.

"It is a lovely winter morning," she remarked; "there must be snow left in the country." Her thought wandered to her old home at Campfield as she spoke, but she brought it back. "You could n't have a better day, Uncle John."

"I see, — I see. You are to lunch out somewhere, are n't you?"

"Yes, — with Alice Orbitt."

"Ah! Then I will stay on at the club for luncheon. We shall meet at dinner, if not before. Don't forget that Kelton is coming to dine and play chess with me afterward. Why do you laugh?"

"Out of compliment to you, that's all. You seem really to be taming Mr. Kelton, uncle; he comes here quite often now, and I hear that he rarely dines out anywhere else."

Mr. Ashley laughed in his turn. "Ah, well! From my point of view Kelton is not a bad fellow, when you once get at him. We are two old bears together. Does he bore you to death?"

"Oh, no, indeed! You see I like bears,—trained ones."

"So much the better! Then we'll let the taming process go on. Good-bye, and good luck to you! Salute Alice for me profoundly, and hold your own with her, my dear; she must n't do all the talking."

"I will try to get in a word now and then, though it will be difficult; but the more Alice talks, the more your ears ought to tingle pleasantly. She is still convinced that the great ball was the finest ever seen, and you should hear her sound your praises."

"Don't talk at all!" said Mr. Ashley. "Listen, and bring home all the points! Praise from the critical Orbitts is a patent of nobility."

"I must tell her that!" laughed Dorothy, as she turned away.

When she was gone, Mr. Ashley neglected the morning news to ruminate on her account. The ball, of which she spoke, he had given a fortnight earlier, in her honor, at the old Assembly Hall, and he had spared nothing to make it a memorable event. That it still remained so was a ground of satisfaction. The handsome ballroom, an ideal place for such a festivity, surely never looked better than on that night, when the whole town had turned out, and Dorothy, with the keenest enjoyment, had danced till the dawn. She seemed to take very kindly to city life. If he could only keep her happy and contented, he asked nothing more. How the young men had flocked around her! Ah! There lay the real danger, not to be warded off. Those young men would continue to flock as persistently as the pigeons in Venice, growing "interested," making love to her, offering themselves, probably, at frequent intervals; and he could do nothing to prevent it; some day, without warning, just when all was going most comfortably, one of those young men would make off with her, — presumably, not the right one!

Which would it be, granting that she was reasonable, discreet, and not a fool, — and all this he could grant justly? But where the heart was involved, due allowance became essential for the unexpected, happening daily within the limited range of his own experience. Which, then, would it be? Why, any one of twenty, whom he could name almost in a breath! To begin with, there was Sam Turner, the favorite leader of cotillons, who, as everybody declared, complimented each attractive débutante with a proposal of marriage. A capital dancer! Yet he could not conceive that Dorothy would be willing to dance with him through life. There was Jack Hyatt, an agreeable nullity, dangerously good-looking. The Hyatts were said always "to marry rich." Well, the inference might easily be that Dorothy would have a comfortable income of her own, some day. Damn it, no! He would n't consider that for another instant. He could n't give her to a Hyatt, even in imagination. Nor to Jim Drake, that horsy idiot! Nor to Tom Trent, however good a club companion, whose grandfather had dealt in soap and peanuts, within his own recollection. Nor, indeed, to any of the others who flashed into his mind, one by one, during this uncomfortable reverie. He found objections, only too readily, to disqualify them all.

The hall-clock struck the hour in deep tones, and he started up. It was time to pull himself together for the country, if he were really going. He went to the front door, stepping out into the porch for a moment to consider the weather conditions, the temperature; then, as he came back into the hall, his look fell by chance upon the card-receiver, heaped high with visiting-cards; and on the top a name, Samuel Duxbury Turner, seemed to stare him in the face.

"There he is, confound him!" muttered Mr. Ashley. "How often does he come, I wonder?"

And, forthwith, the head of the house began to pull over the cards, searching for a repetition of the obnoxious one. This led him to another name and still another that he had quite forgotten, repeated more than once. He sorted them out in regular order, chuckling at the thought of the pretty game he was playing with Dorothy's visiting-list. The process consumed fully fifteen minutes of his precious time, and its results surprised him. One name, like Abou Ben Adhem's, led all the rest; and the name was Staunton Ives.

"Ives!" he kept repeating, as he shuffled the cards, and went his way. "Ives! I never once thought of Ives! And I believe that I should mind him least of all. Hang me, if he is n't the best of the lot!"

Meanwhile, Dorothy, all unconscious of this casting of her horoscope, pursued her quiet course, across Garden and Common, by the gnarled old Paddock elms, which then seemed as well secured from upheaval and annihilation as the consecrated ground they overshadowed, to the family pew in King's Chapel. She had grown very fond of the old church, whose white walls and arches, simple, dignified, and beautiful, so happily excluded thought of ignoble things; and she was never tired of studying certain characteristic details of decoration there; the graceful pulpit and its curving stair-rail; the carved garlands, the genial cherubs; the golden crown and mitre upon the organ; above all, the lines of mural tablets, with their marble busts, emblazoned 'scutcheons and long-drawn-out inscriptions commemorating departed worthies, — the pillars, so to speak, of that time-honored foundation. Her mind often wandered from the service to dwell upon these adornments, subtly harmonized, as she had been told, into a close resemblance to one of Wren's interiors in the City of

London. However that might be, leaning back in her corner of the ample pew, still called "the Governor's," she established a relation with some ideal past, never really known to her, yet nearer than the murmur of the busy street. She lived for the time being in a tale of Hawthorne, and if all his shadowy figures of the Province House had stalked up the broad aisle to take their former places, it would scarcely have surprised her. The minister, with his gown and band of traditional pattern, distinct from any other, might have been good Parson Hooper, himself. She caught herself wondering sometimes, whether, on that Sunday or the next, he would resume his black veil.

On this particular morning Miss Ashley's day-dream carried her even farther afield, — as far, indeed, as her old home in the country, where the small church had traditions of its own, which, recurring one by one, tinged with incipient homesickness her straying fancy. She struggled against this resolutely, listening hard for the text and then forgetting it the moment after. The swaying elm branches beyond the gallery windows, traced against the clear blue sky, reminded her of Campfield again. She thought of her garden there, lying dormant under its protecting sheet of snow; and of the closed house, bitterly cold, of course, and damp, too, perhaps; she must go up soon and pass a day, if only to open the blinds and let the sunshine in; till at last, the preacher roused her with an emphatic word, and she followed attentively the summing-up of his discourse, though her ignorance of what had gone before made it but half intelligible. Then came the last hymn, in which the congregation joined. She stood up with the others, and, glancing skyward once more, noticed for the first time a familiar figure alone in an upper pew of the left-hand gallery. It was only one of her many partners in the dance, Mr. Turner, whom she had never seen at church before that she remembered. Connecting him wholly with secular observances, she had an amused sense now that he had lost his way and was momentarily out of place. Somehow, it seemed unlike him to be there. What could have induced his sudden change of heart?

The light thought glanced away and was forgotten. After the benediction she hurried out among the first, and walked quickly on toward home alone; but soon she grew conscious of a footstep behind, gaining upon hers with obvious intention; and in another moment Mr. Turner came up to ask if he might join her, since they were walking the same way. She graciously agreed to this, admitting that she had noticed him in the church, with a mischievous comment to the effect that his presence there was unusual. He granted it, plunging into an attempt at light banter which surprised her by its note of constraint. Embarrassment of any kind was the last thing she associated with this queer devotee of worldly functions, always immaculate in dress, still satisfied to be known as an accomplished leader of the dance. Youth survived in him beyond the normal limit, for he must, surely, be over forty. But he had kept his figure; and his round, rosy face, though wrinkles were beginning to form in it, looked like a caricature of one of those gilded cherubs in the church. Its mild complacency, however, was strangely clouded at the present moment. He appeared, indeed, to be ill at ease, as if hampered in his conversational facility by some grave, oppressive thought. Dorothy, walking on beside him, wondered what this could mean; but she did not have to wonder long.

When they were quite alone in one of the less frequented paths of the Common, Mr. Turner drew an emphatic breath; then, without further warning, he burst forth into an offer of marriage, and, recovering all his fluency, enlarged upon his irresistible love for her, the happiness that this might mean to both, their future prospects. His unchecked speech, for some time, gave her no opportunity to reply; moreover, at first, she was too much amazed by it for words. Flushed with rage, she looked straight before her, quickening her pace at every syllable, reaching the point of angry tears and passing it. For, suddenly, the comic side of the situation presented itself so forcibly that she burst out laughing. Experienced as he was, Mr. Turner recognized in this a note of hostility. His argument collapsed, all at once, in the middle of a sentence.

"Why, Mr. Turner!" Dorothy exclaimed, and laughed again, almost hysterically.

"You cannot consider it?" he asked feebly, in his confusion taking two steps to her one as they hurried on.

"Not for a single instant; it is quite impossible — quite!" she retorted. "The audacious little monster!" she thought, and laughed aloud once more.

"But — "

Miss Ashley stopped short, turning and facing him, almost toppling him over with the shock of his arrested flight. "How could you have thought — ?" she cried. "How could you? Please do not say another word to me upon this subject, Mr. Turner."

As she spoke, the contrast between his cherubic features and their expression of discomfiture overcame her with its absurdity; and he, looking up, detected the smile still lurking on her lips.

"It's not a laughing matter — to me," he said, ruefully.

The words and their tone disarmed her, diverting her thought to self-reproach, as she walked on, slowly now, with downcast eyes. "I beg your pardon," she resumed, gently, striving to apprehend his point of view. "I did not mean to be so rude. You must have seen that I was startled. I never thought — I never could think — that you would misunderstand. We were friends, of course — but — "

"But that's all?"

"All, yes. I am sorry — "

"Between friends, we'll call it off, then," he returned, brightening pleasantly. "Will you dance the cotillon with me, a week from Thursday, at the Linsleys' ball?"

"I am not going to the Linsleys' ball," said Dorothy, instantly committing herself to this course, in spite of the fact that, a moment before, it was by no means what she had intended.

"Ah — well! Another time, I hope!" was Mr. Turner's amiable response. "This is my way. Good-morning!"

So, with a final salutation, somewhat abrupt, yet impressively polite, he turned into a diverging path and walked off briskly.

Dorothy went her own way apart, perturbed and ruffled, laying, at first, all the blame for this untoward incident upon herself. Such an advance stood alone in her experience; and to induce it she felt, at the outset, that there must have been heedlessness amounting to fault upon her side; but, making in her mind for him every possible allowance, she could recall nothing to justify his misconstruction. She had met him cordially, of course, yet never intimately. Indeed, after a strict account, it seemed to her that she hardly knew the man. How, then, even inadvertently, should she have led him on? Gradually relieved, she began to see that the mistake had sprung from his own assurance. Like his audacity, his conceit was monstrous. The comforting thought made way for another, full of irritation and alarm. Were they all like that, these agreeable men who danced so well, and talked so fluently? Must she be always on guard, keeping them at bay, never uttering a civil word without weighing it? If so, daily intercourse would grow unbearable, impossible. She would go straight back to Campfield, shut the door, and never stir beyond its threshold. Here was one of them, now, Mr. Trent, coming toward her in the street. She must greet him, of course, but formally, coldly, and then speed on with flying feet. Even so, metaphorically speaking, he might turn and rend her!

Mr. Trent did nothing of the kind, however. On the contrary, he passed her by in normal and conventional fashion, without appearing to notice her undue haste to escape from his dangerous possibilities. That fear was premature at least, and her sense of humor, again coming to the front, soon enabled her to dismiss it altogether. In this light Mr. Turner's attitude seemed absurdly anomalous, most unlikely to recur. It was a comic adventure, well out of the way already, and need no longer be considered. He had taken her refusal very easily, and she must do likewise. If all the bachelors of her acquaintance were preparing to put on asses' heads at a moment's notice, the world would be too fantastic. She declared that inconceivable. And, now, she was walking too far; she must turn at once, to get back in time for luncheon.

As she retraced her steps in heightened spirits, it occurred to her to wonder playfully whether among these same bachelor acquaintances there could be any one to whom, had he put himself in Mr. Turner's place, she would have given a different answer. Reviewing them, in turn, she was amused to find more than one for whose false position she would have been sincerely sorry, supposing him, for purposes of argument, to have assumed it; but these were precisely the men whom she deemed incapable of such fatuity. And while her sympathy, newly awakened, might have granted to one or another something like respectful consideration, it would have come in the end to the same thing. Her negative, when all was done, must have been absolute, final. Into what queer game of solitaire had this freak of fancy led her? She laughed at the thought. Was there no one, then, among them all, strong enough to awaken doubt as well as sympathy with such a word? No one! No one! *Unless it were* — No! She would not admit that possibility even in imagination, for the sake of going on with the game. Really, there was no one. Either she must be destined to abide in the single state, or her day of renouncement — for better, for worse — showed no glimmer of its dawn.

The Caspar Orbitts dwelt in an old house, on Beacon Hill, which had been immemorially one of the family strongholds. All therein, from the polished mahogany and colonial silver to the early copies of Italian masterpieces, had an air of imperishable comfort, well above reproach, with no suggestion of modern competitive extravagance. For the elders of this branch, upholding racial traditions, were fastidious in matters of taste, to which they applied what they called the rational standard, — their own; and any departure from that was deplored. Alice, their only child, went forth as a kind of scout into the fashionable world, bringing home reports of its reckless behavior to their impregnable fastness, where the only advance permitted was an intellectual one. The best new books were always to be found in Mrs. Orbitt's drawing-room. She and her husband read, discussed, and weighed them with the scales of judgment; their aim being to broaden with the times, rationally; but to yield no inch to the shifting vagaries of transitory fashion. When they entertained, it was in a form of simple severity which never varied, generally described as "the Orbitt way," and thus accepted, even by those who liked it least.

To-day, Miss Ashley was the only guest, making the fourth at table. It was not her first visit, and she understood the conditions perfectly. To her, these, if dogmatic, were stimulating too. In that rarefied atmosphere she seemed to step into the page of some old review, written in the grand manner, somewhat dry, but of unquestionable worth, spurring on the intellect. When she made this comparison once to her uncle, he laughed, and assured her that nothing could please Mrs. Orbitt more than to be likened to a leaf of the "Revue des Deux Mondes"; adding that the gray mare was the better horse in that family. Dorothy was reminded of this to-day, when her hostess quoted an article from the latest number of the "Revue," and reproved her husband for a neglected duty, namely, the reading of it. The noun "duty" and the adjective "rational" were well-worn items in Mrs. Orbitt's vocabulary. She had married into them, so to speak, and, like most disciples, bettered the instruction.

The talk, during luncheon, was held chiefly upon high impersonal planes, though Alice fluttered athwart them in a way which Dorothy feared might prove intolerably light. Yet her remarks were tolerated; sometimes even received with a faint smile; probably from recognition of the fact that, in view of the standard at home, no really serious lapse on her part could occur; but upon her daughter's allusion to Mr. Ashley's ball, Mrs. Orbitt grew reminiscent. When Alice had come out, they had given a dance for her of a rational sort, as she believed, — a protest against extravagance, especially in point of hours. The company had been invited for six o'clock, and the music had stopped at midnight. She was sorry to find that their example was not oftener followed.

"If it were, what would become of dinner?" asked Alice. "Nobody else thinks of dining at five, as we do."

"It would be better for them all, if they did," her mother replied. "Five is far from irrational; indeed, three was considered late for dinner, when I was a girl."

"The sun sets later, now," said Mr. Orbitt.

"Oh, Caspar!" exclaimed his wife.

"Of course, mother!" Alice interposed. "And one must dance attendance on it, — or dance alone."

Mrs. Orbitt smiled, and glided prudently to graver themes, which were fairly well sustained until the end of luncheon left Alice and Dorothy alone together.

"Is n't mother too extraordinary in her prejudices?"

Alice demanded. "She never can understand why I want to be like other people. I have n't dared to tell her yet that the Linsley ball is to begin later than ever. And as for the decorations, — oh, dear! If she knew!"

"The decorations?" Dorothy inquired.

"Yes. Have n't you heard? Real vines with clusters of hot-house grapes at intervals, — think of that! Can't you hear mother calling it 'wanton luxury'?"

"When she says that, I shall heartily agree with her," remarked Dorothy, laughing.

"Ah, well, — one has to do something new! It's the spirit of the age. I hear, too, that Tom Trent is to lead the cotillon. There's innovation for you, — when no one but Sam Turner has led for years! By the way, look out for Sam! He led with you at your ball, as I remember."

"Does he bite?" asked Dorothy, feigning round-eyed innocence.

"No; but after leading, he is very apt to offer himself to his partner. It's a custom."

"Is it, indeed? Then, he had better not!" Dorothy returned, with the same ready simplicity.

"He knows that, as well as you do; but he can't seem to conquer the habit. Remember! I have warned you."

"Many thanks! Would you mind telling me if there is any one else to 'look out for'?"

"No," said Alice, pondering the matter with an unconscious suggestion of her mother's judicial gravity.

"No! I believe not. After Sam, so far as I can see, you will be safe, — until the right man appears."

"'The right man'!" Dorothy repeated. "How shall I know him, Alice, when he comes?"

"That I can't pretend to tell you, old and wary though I am; but if he should come, — sometimes, of course, they don't, — you *will* know him, undoubtedly; — at least, according to the high authorities."

"But if, in spite of the authorities, I should n't know him," laughed Dorothy, "how dreadful that would be!"

On the way home she congratulated herself upon having resisted a momentary impulse to tell Alice all about Mr. Turner and hold him up to ridicule. Not to reveal his latest escapade was best and kindest, even though he did not deserve that tender consideration. She was glad to have been assured that he might be docketed as unique. When several of the young men passed by, each in his turn, her heart beat no harder either from fear, or otherwise. They were not dangerous, and the right man certainly was not among them.

Dorothy had no further adventures, that day. When Mr. Kelton came to dine, he was in a mood comparatively mild and unaggressive. After dinner, he and her uncle went immediately into the library, and settled themselves there at the chess-board. She found a book, and sat with it by the fire in the drawing-room, occasionally looking up at them as they played on in the distance. Mr. Kelton had a habit of holding his move in abeyance with the warning phrase, "*J'adoube!*" This and the announcement of "Check!" from one or the other, were the only sounds that broke the silence.

The book lay in Dorothy's lap with her hands clasped upon its open pages; and she stared at the fire in thought apparently so deep that Kelton, glancing her way, caught himself wishing that he could fathom it; a passing distraction which cost him dear, — for, wholly on account of that, he lost his first game.

The thought, if fathomed, would hardly have been worth the price which Kelton paid. Dorothy, reviewing her talk with Alice Orbitt earlier in the day, had merely permitted herself to wonder whether the right man would ever come, and in that case, whether she should know him when he came.

VIII

METAMORPHOSES

On a certain evening of the following week Staunton Ives devoted himself to the study of an intricate account, brought home from the office for purposes of examination. The task proved to be long and absorbing; when, finally, it was done, he could not help smiling at his own satisfaction in the result. A month ago he would scarcely have stolen hours from the night, with a willing mind, for such a piece of work; nor would he have looked back upon it with any feeling other than relief; but now that his face was set resolutely against further literary ventures, the problems of business pressed in upon him to fill the vacant place. "So one fire drives another out!" he thought, as he brushed aside his papers; "yet, for all that, one need not wear a chain of ledgers like Marley's ghost, — nor will I ever!" As if to confirm this resolve he rose impatiently, and going to his books took from the shelf of poets a volume of Herrick. Opening it at random, he read: —

"Man knows where first he ships himself; but he
Never can tell where shall his landing be."

Ives applied the lines to his own case, laughing at their aptness; then he turned the leaves to pass from epigram to lyric, to light upon his favorite "good verses" and read them for the hundredth time. Kelton, knocking at his door half an hour later, found him seated by the fire, thus employed.

"I interrupt you in the throes of composition," said the visitor, looking askance at the disorder of the writing-table.

Ives, with a laugh, displayed a sheet of the account current. "Far from it, as you see!" he replied; "nothing, in fact, could well be farther. Figures, they say, won't lie, and these are proved correct, — I 've done with them. So sit down, man, and toast your toes!"

"Well, if you 're really not in labor," said Kelton, subsiding into an easy-chair. "No, thanks, — I won't take anything; except, perhaps, a pipe, if you 've got one handy. I dropped in for a bit of talk, that 's all, provided you were n't sitting up with the Muse."

"She has n't arrived," said Ives, bringing a small table with pipes and tobacco; "and I don't mind telling you that she is n't expected. The truth is that I 've barred her out." He moved his own chair nearer, and stirred the fire nervously.

"What! You 've given up dramatic work?"

"Yes, precisely that."

Kelton filled and lighted his pipe in silence; then, after a few puffs: "I suppose you men all have these times of discouragement," said he.

"Don't misunderstand me!" Ives returned, briskly. "I have abandoned my dramatic flights definitely — deliberately. My wings were not strong enough to soar. I could n't fly high, — I would n't fly low. Do you see? And my office-work is exacting, as well as interesting. I found myself forced to choose between two pursuits. That is why I bring home the accounts of Ashley and Company to verify. My choice is made."

Kelton had private reasons for rejoicing at this calm, clear, and, in his opinion, thoroughly sane announcement; but he was not a man to show elation; and now, after another pause, he merely remarked: —

"Old Jarvis says the bite of the tarantula is seldom fatal. I did n't know, however, that it could be cured so easily."

"Mine was n't much of a bite, you know," said Ives; "it was a nibble."

At this speech Kelton actually smiled in undisguised approval. "Here 's a metamorphosis!" he noted; "I congratulate you upon having found yourself. I confess that it surprises me somewhat. Is there anything behind this of which it is proper to speak?"

"Behind it? No! I have exchanged one ambition for another, as seemed to me wisest, upon the whole, — that 's all. What should there be behind it, Kelton?"

"There need not, of necessity, be anything. On the other hand, there might be several things. Among others, notably, the usual one, — a woman. If one's ambition included the collateral comfort of matrimony, a descent from cloud-land with a rush, like yours, would not only explain but justify itself."

"Justify, eh?" laughed Ives; "rather a strong word for you to choose in that connection, is n't it?"

He stared into the fire, nursing one knee with clasped hands.

Kelton turned a keen look upon him, and answered lightly: —

"Oh, to-night, I am tolerant. We 're not all built alike, — and you are of the age. Then, this afternoon, I met Randall — "

"Randall? Who is he?"

"Tom Randall! Well, he 's an old boy about my time of life, who has lived single for the most of it; but a few years ago he was translated; he gave hostages to fortune, — got married, in short. The very last man, you would say, to lose his head, — contented, cautious, easy-going, with a purse long enough for one, but short for two. He paid the penalty, of course, in a right-about-face, leaving his habits, his clubs, everything behind him. He 's a suburban now, — remote, inaccessible, given over to strict economy. We used to meet daily; now, I see him twice a year, perhaps. But if he does n't like it, he makes the best bluff ever known. You may doubt, you can't disprove; — and, damn it! he grows young!"

"Has he children?" Ives asked.

"Yes, one, — or two, I believe. There is a family."

"Ah! I see."

The silence, this time, was prolonged. Kelton spoke, at last, in a subdued, abstracted tone, as if he were thinking aloud: "It 's odd to see a man's whole nature change like that before one's face and eyes. Meeting

Randall, one is moved to wonder if it would be the same with the rest of us."

His gentleness of tone and speech struck Ives as unusual. "You *are* tolerant!" he thought. The mood accorded with his own, and he followed it up. "Given Randall's luck," he said, aloud, "it would be the same, undoubtedly. He has found his affinity. We must admit that he has the best of it."

"I am ready to admit that he would have us think so."

"But suppose, for purposes of argument, that he really had; would n't you envy him?"

Kelton chuckled. "To-night, perhaps, yes; to-morrow, very possibly, no! And you?"

"I should envy him to-night, to-morrow, at all times and seasons. I 'm not afraid to confess it."

"Hear! Hear! You have advanced!"

"No, I remain stationary; or, rather, I go backward, like one of your hermit-crabs. To hold that view does n't advance me a single step. Marriage seems farther off than ever."

Kelton shook the ashes from his pipe, and laid it down. "Ah, well, cheer up!" said he. "It may interest you to know that I would n't trust you around the corner. You 're no true hermit-crab, in spite of your shell. I 'm an astrologer, — I can cast your horoscope." He stood up to warm himself at the fire, and went on: "Let us see! Some day, you 'll come to me and say you 're going to marry the best girl that ever lived. And I — "

"Oh, you'll envy me, of course,—for the moment."

"No: I won't promise so much. I was only about to say that, while I should be sorry on my own account, I should try to be glad on yours; try, that is, to accept your optimistic view and to hope for the best. So, when your day of confession comes, don't hesitate to make a clean breast of it!"

"Thanks, I won't. Whom do you suspect, Kelton?"

"I have no underhand suspicions. We are dealing with the future, not the present; but the longest way round is the shortest way home. You'll see. Good-night to you!"

"Good-night, good astrologer!"

Kelton, at the door, turned back. "By the way," he said, "you're quite in earnest about that other matter,—forswearing stage business, eh?"

"Entirely so. I mean what I say, in giving it up."

"Seriously, then, I'm very glad. Stick to it! That's the wisest course."

So he went out, holding to the mood of tolerance unaccountably. All the Hydra heads of inveterate sarcasm seemed, for the moment, lulled asleep. Ives, who had braced himself for some sharp home-thrust over his confession of weakness in renouncing authorship, was grateful for this moderation; fixed in his resolve, he was still capable of a wistful, backward glance, and, desiring approval, desired that it should be free from over-emphasis. Kelton's treatment of the case had been full of interest, judicious, almost tender.

Tenderness, too, had cropped up in those other irrelevant remarks occasioned by his suspicion of an amatory first cause. What had happened? Was there a transmutation in his nature? or was this some phase, existent always but now first revealed, of pure Keltonic eccentricity?

Meanwhile, Kelton below, quite unconscious of anything enigmatic in his own behavior, brooded over that of his neighbor for a space, before proceeding, with the aid of another pipe, to compose the following letter: —

DEAR ASHLEY: —

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas —
Corpora, —

Otherwise, I am moved to state that our young serpent already, of his own accord, has cast his skin, and awakened into what may be called a period of renascence. The mysterious first cause of this I know not; but, so it is. For, going in, prepared discreetly to interrogate him, to advise and urge him to a point, if need be, — incognito, as you desired, — I was met by the news that his literary obligations had all been canceled, because of their conflict with the claims of business, — these latter proving thus the stronger forces. The fact I learned not an hour ago; yet, if I can judge, it is no rash conclusion, rather, one reached deliberately by slow degrees. I commend to you, therefore, this act of wisdom (truly anguineal, if you will pardon me the word) which is worthy of an older head than his, wishing him in his new incarnation all the success that your designs upon him seem to prognosticate, and remaining ever, my dear Ashley,

Yours to command,
HUMPHREY KELTON.

IX

AN EMPTY SHRINE

Weeks had passed since Mrs. Middlecot so casually had begged her trifling favor, — that instigation to make off with one of Kelton's personal effects, in which Ives had feigned jovial acquiescence without committing himself to any definite scheme. And as in all this time her capricious longing to recover the old likeness of herself by occult means was not referred to again, Ives hoped that she had forgotten it. Nothing, however, was more unlikely, as he well knew. He had, therefore, no reason to be startled, when, upon their unexpected meeting in the midst of a crowded function, she suddenly asked him why his invention was so long at fault; yet the terms of her inquiry were so vague, that for the moment he really did not understand their drift, and frankly said this.

" The picture ! " she explained ; " you were to invent some way of securing it, — something very artful and mystifying, a mysterious disappearance. Need I say what picture, or do you remember now ? "

" Yes, now I remember," said Ives ; as he did in fact, too well.

" Well, have you found a plan ? "

He had not, but now there was no escape. " Let us step aside here, and talk about it ! " he returned, procrastinating to the last, as they moved toward a quiet corner. At this very moment, by a coincidence that seemed no less than providential, the plan of all others flashed into his mind; yet he checked an exultant tremor, and went on in the same tone of deliberation: "You have never seen my rooms, I remember. Will you do me the honor to chaperon a small party there at tea-time? Any afternoon of next week will do."

"With pleasure, but — "

"But what has that to do with the more important matter, you mean? Why, everything! Since my scheme — the best in the world — is to have you remove the picture with your own hand. Do you see? The gift was yours — you, yourself, withdraw it! No one else is responsible, and you are, certainly, the very last one liable to the accident of suspicion. Could anything be better?"

In truth, the scheme, suddenly evolved though it had been, showed a specious and beguiling ingenuity which Mrs. Middlecot acknowledged with a smile. "I like the idea," she decided; "it is capital, — a real inspiration; but how — "

"Oh, the details are entirely simple. His door is never locked, and in the early afternoon he is never at home. You have but to arrive a little before the others. It will be the affair of a moment only."

"Very good; I will come early. On what day, and who will be the others?"

"Miss Orbitt, for one; she has expressed a wish to see my dwelling-place. And I 'll ask Miss Ashley with her, and one or two men, Hyatt and Trent, perhaps, if you agree, — any others you may choose, so long as the rooms will hold them. As to the day — "

These were the less important matters, readily adjusted. The day was fixed and the party limited to six, all told. Miss Orbitt and Miss Ashley accepted Mr. Ives's invitation with joy ; the two men whom he had chosen likewise answered it affirmatively, if less effusively. By a diplomatic move he had thus evaded both horns of Mrs. Middlecot's awkward little dilemma, converting the issue into a pleasant reunion of choice spirits. All promised well. Yet when the appointed hour came, the well-laid scheme miscarried curiously in more ways than one.

His guests were bidden for five o'clock ; and he had, therefore, urged Mrs. Middlecot to arrive by half-past four, at the latest. He would be there, of course, to receive her, to direct her descent upon the hostile territory, assuring himself beforehand of Kelton's absence, extending to her that reassurance, together with his own moral support, if such it could be called ; but at four the difficulties began. Ives was summoned by Mr. Ashley into his private office upon business of vast importance, not to be postponed nor neglected. The minutes flew, while in every one of them he hoped to be dismissed, set free. The half-hour struck incredibly soon ; dismayed, he conjured up a mental picture of his chief guest, alone, pacing his rooms in wrath ; or, perhaps, even deserting her post of chaperon ; yet another quarter went by before, in the peculiar circumstances affecting Ashley and Company's future and his own, he could becomingly demand release. Then he escaped, speeding home to find all his guests assembled, while Mrs. Middlecot, quite unruffled, apparently enjoying the joke, did smiling honors without him. To compare notes with her now was impossible. Had she pursued her adventure alone, or not?—he wondered. Yes, probably. Something expressive in her serenity seemed to imply not only this, but also that the adventure had prospered in a general way; but for the present he could only stifle his curiosity concerning the precise course of it.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Middlecot, keeping her appointment to the minute, was ushered by the servants into the silent rooms which, obviously, had been swept and garnished for her coming. Left alone there, she awaited her host patiently for five other minutes of uncommon length. Then the clock warned her that she must be up and doing, if she meant to do anything before the others came. Mr. Ives was detained, or he had forgotten. It did not matter. She knew her ground; if only the coast was clear.

Opening the door, she peered out cautiously, and went on as far as the stair-rail. No one stirred in the vacant halls. That door below was Mr. Kelton's, of course. She would go down and knock at it by way of precaution. If he were at home, he would answer. She could, then, either resort to flight, or wait placidly to make profuse apologies for knocking at the wrong door, when he opened it. If there were no answer, no sound, she had but to turn the handle and go in. The photograph, in its silver frame, would be a conspicuous object, within easy reach. One minute, and the deed was done! Should she take the photograph, and leave the frame? Yes, if all was quiet, and time served. She would like to imagine him discovering his loss, speechless, in blank amazement, before that relic of the past from which the precious jewel had been spirited away.

Cheered by the thought, she knocked at Kelton's door, once and again. Then, as no response came, she glided into the room, and let the door close gently; stopping, for an instant, just within it, to receive, tremulous with excitement, a chaotic first impression of dust and general disorder, in an atmosphere of stale tobacco-smoke; but, perceiving that she must, really, be alone, she began to notice details which stood out clearly enough in the unflattering light of the gray afternoon, — the worn rugs and hangings, the shabby furniture, the fine old fireplace, the ornaments of the mantelpiece, among which she counted upon finding that conspicuous object of her search; but it was not there. In the next moment she caught sight of the once familiar frame upon the corner-cabinet, and made a dash for it. To her astonishment, the frame was empty.

For an instant she stood still, perplexed, refusing to accept the evidence of her own eyesight. The thing must be there, of course. Some curious meddler, a servant, perhaps, bent upon close examination, had taken out the faded portrait, and, in carelessly replacing it, had slipped it behind the velvet background. She pulled the frame apart, finding nothing. The precious jewel had been spirited away by other hands, before its time.

In mingled amusement and humiliation Mrs. Middlecot fitted the detached parts of the frame into place. Her small joke, so artfully conceived, had failed suddenly at the very outset, recoiling upon herself. There was to be no righteous theft, after all. Her face burned at the thought of why she was there, and of what she was attempting, — unsuccessfully. Then light seemed to illumine the oppressive cloud, comforting her with a very obvious explanation. For some good reason, to be communicated later, Mr. Ives had forestalled her, possessing himself of the portrait, as had been originally planned. That was, of course, the fact which should have suggested itself at once. She had yielded to undue eagerness, instead of waiting for him calmly, according to their agreement. Well, that could be set right upon the instant. She would go back immediately, before he came.

As she moved toward the door, the sound of a man's step upon the stairs below stopped her abruptly. "Mr. Ives at last!" she thought; and had already turned the handle to spring out upon him; but a prudent second thought changed her intent. It might be another guest arriving in advance of the hour, and not Mr. Ives at all. She would wait, and let the step go on. While it drew nearer she shrank from the door instinctively, as if that solid barrier were a transparent medium, capable of revealing her unwarranted presence behind it to the passer-by; recognizing with a chill, in the firm, rapid footfall, not the indecision of a casual visitor but the authoritative approach of one who knew his way and had the right to use it. What if — ? But hardly was this last appalling thought complete, when the door opened and Humphrey Kelton strode into the room.

He stood still in silent wonder; then mechanically shutting the door behind him, he stared about, as if to assure himself that the rooms were really his. Mrs. Middlecot tried to speak, but words failed her.

"I beg your pardon —" he began.

Mrs. Middlecot laughed hysterically, and recovered in a measure her self-possession. "I beg yours!" she returned. "The fact was — the fact is — Mr. Ives — he has friends coming, coming to tea. I am in charge, and I thought — a chaperon's duties, you see!"

The measure was exhausted, and its effort at fluency trickled away in another weak explosion of hollow mirth; but Mr. Kelton gravely supplied the deficiency.

"I see. You mistook my quarters for his, very naturally; they correspond exactly. Ives lives overhead. Let me show you!"

He turned to open the door, while his unbidden guest gathered herself together to take advantage of the trifling error without rectification of it. Then, suddenly, the halls resounded with the murmur of voices. Mr. Ives's company, arriving in force, was proceeding in a leisurely manner up the stairs. Mr. Kelton, with a significant smile, checked his advance, holding the door closed. Mrs. Middlecot recoiled again; but in the moment of enforced delay came a new impulse to tell the truth and have it out with him,—less, perhaps, from a love of truth than from unquenchable feminine curiosity regarding the old likeness which had so long been in his keeping. She was quite herself again, now; and the unconventional eddy into which she had drifted no longer annoyed, but amused her.

"Don't misunderstand!" she said in a low, clear tone, distinct above the outer merriment. "I knew the way, and lost it purposely — simply to reclaim my own property."

His eyes flashed up in swift interrogation. Mrs. Middlecot looked not at him, but at the empty frame upon the cabinet, and at once he understood.

"The mistake seems to have been one of ownership," he returned, with quiet sarcasm.

"There need be no discussion of that point," she answered, disdainfully. "It is a woman's privilege to change her mind, — in certain cases to recall a gift, — and at such times all question of ownership should be waived. In this case, my wish, though often expressed, was disregarded. So I took the law into my own hands."

Mr. Kelton confronted her with a mirthful look, offset by preternatural gravity of speech. "Ineffectually," he murmured.

"Thus far, yes!" said Mrs. Middlecot, with a sense of irritation, comprehending his amusement, though not its cause; "but now I express the wish in person, to better purpose, I hope. Once more, I claim my property."

Mr. Kelton's smile broadened. "Unfortunately, the wish cannot be granted," he rejoined, calmly. "The property — whether yours or mine — it is now impossible to restore."

"Impossible! Why impossible?" she demanded, indignantly.

"Because the chief part thereof no longer exists. I believed the picture to be mine, — it certainly was once of immense value to me, — and in that misapprehension of the ownership I destroyed it. One may do as one likes, I suppose, with one's own — valuables."

"Oh, to be sure!" retorted Mrs. Middlecot, inwardly on fire with rage, which outwardly was ill-concealed. "I should have made the same disposition of it, myself. Thank you for respecting my wish so considerately, and anticipating it."

"Allow me to make the only amends in my power, by returning what remains of your gift, — the frame, I mean, — since — "

"Since you have no farther use for it," interposed Mrs. Middlecot, losing self-control. "Pray, accept that in return for your thoughtfulness. It is yours to keep or to destroy, or — or to use again."

"Thank you," he replied, with cool urbanity; then, opening his table-drawer, he laid the frame carefully away there, and gently closed the drawer upon it, as though it were a priceless thing.

"And now, if you please —" pursued Mrs. Middlecot, striving to counterfeit indifference. Turning her back upon him she stepped toward the door, which Mr. Kelton, bowing low with exaggerated politeness, opened wide. "Good-afternoon!" he said, as she swept out into the vacant hall and up the staircase.

She did not return the salutation.

"Well?" whispered Ives, at the end of the afternoon, when, as he helped her into her wrap, they were for the moment drawn apart from the others, who likewise made preparations for departure. "Did all go as it should below stairs?"

"Quite!" she whispered back.

"Too bad that I failed you! But I could n't help —"

"It did not matter. The bone of contention is destroyed."

"Ah, so much the better! You see, I —" But here the others broke in, and he left the remark unfinished.

Neither then nor thereafter did Mrs. Middlecot refer to the affair again, and, taking his cue from her, he prudently refrained from mentioning it. When he next visited his neighbor's rooms, picture and frame alike had disappeared, and, naturally enough, no opportunity to introduce the subject was given him by Kelton; so that the true sequence of events attending the "bone of contention" and its fate Ives never knew — never even guessed.

X

THE FIFTEENTH OF APRIL

The winter days, indistinguishably obscured by petty detail, drifted on in long succession after that, before Ives woke to the fact that the season was almost over, already merged in spring. It would have puzzled him to give an accurate account of the employment of this time. Each hour seemed to have absorbed him more and more in Ashley and Company's affairs, which prospered amazingly. He, prospering with them, had kept his good resolution to forswear stage business, as his friend Kelton expressed it; nor had he felt the smallest temptation to do otherwise. Even an effort at composition requires solitude; and his waking hours now rarely were passed alone. Such distractions as he deemed permissible had been purely of a social nature. For these the wind blew where it listed, carrying him with it; except in certain marked instances, recurring none too often, remembrance of them grew hopelessly confused.

The exceptions proved the rule, — the usual one, as Kelton again would have called it; for the incidents that stood out with startling, explanatory clearness against the intricate background, were all more or less connected with Miss Ashley. He knew just when they had met and where, no matter how long ago it was.

Words which she had spoken, at such or such a time, he mentally reiterated in the very tones that she had used. At first, he attached slight importance to this; hers was an extremely interesting personality, that was all. Gradually, as these remarkable impressions multiplied, he perceived that to him her personality was far more interesting than any other; yet even so, admitting the new idea in its full significance, as at last he found himself compelled to do, his impulse was to evade the issue. He had fallen in love, perhaps; nay, probably; — but what of that? It did not follow that his love would be returned. According to preconceived notions of his own, he was in no position to marry. Marriage, which had always seemed out of the question, still remained as far away as ever. Who would suspect his awkward predicament, if he kept his own counsel? Why might he not, indefinitely, go on as he was?

Young in deed and in experience, walking blindly yet recklessly, he forgot that none of us go on as we are. Each day, each hour, brings a subtle change to the individual; and the complications of modern life are such that no neutral ground in it short of pillared isolation is conceivable. Moreover, in this instance, the chief barrier between Staunton Ives and matrimony — one of defense or of impediment, as defined by his varying moods — suddenly ceased to exist.

John Ashley, for some inscrutable reason, had shown of late a disposition to advance Ives more rapidly than he could have hoped, or than, in his modest opinion, he deserved. Not that he had failed in adapting himself to new duties. On the contrary, one important matter, left to his discretion, was carried through so promptly that each of the partners, in turn, had commended his course. Ashley, himself, must have spoken of this to others; for Humphrey Kelton, one night over his fire, had hinted that he knew of it. Yet the success of the scheme seemed due rather to good luck than to superior skill; and when, as the direct result of it, Ives was offered a partnership in the house, the offer took him by surprise. He had known that this might happen some day, but had not dreamed that the day was so near. His share, at first, would be comparatively small, but the step forward was decisive, confirming his career, affecting all his future. Indeed, the actual money gain was so considerable that now from his own point of view Ives was well off. He could no longer assert that he was not in a position to marry. Marriage, instead of remaining as far away as ever, presented itself as a possibility to be dealt with according to his inclination.

There came a holiday early in April; and in the afternoon of it, tempted less by unusually fine weather than by his desire for self-communion, Ives undertook what for him was an unusual thing,—namely, a long, solitary walk out of town, making his objective point a hilltop famous for its view. He reached this while the sun was still high; and from its open acres of rude pasture-land he looked down upon the river winding out of the west, between hills more distant and thickly wooded, to flow on through stretches of marsh, still brown from the winter; till the sluggish course was lost among the city's crude suburban outposts. Eastward it reappeared, sweeping around the city itself in a wide flood of blue, beyond which the heaped-up walls, remotely blended, looked like battlemented ramparts. Even the tall, ugly warehouses, rising against a gray background of mist that overhung the river's mouth and the sea, transfigured out of recognition, lost their air of sordid utility. They, too, harmonized by distance with the rest, gained picturesqueness that was mediæval, to "dream in Italy," according to the native poet's word.

Ives waited there a while alone, to watch the roofs and spires change with the changing light; then made a half-circuit of the hill and turned townward by a woody slope, in which he followed a brook that wound along a rough bed under fallen boughs. On one of these he seated himself, enjoying the pleasant solitude, idly tossing stones into the water; but his thoughts soon wandered on toward the world of men and his own prospective part therein. He pulled from his pocket a printed slip of paper dated some days ahead, — on the fifteenth of April. It was the proof-sheet of Ashley and Company's announcement concerning him, and he read it for the twentieth time with a glow of satisfaction: —

"On and after this date Mr. Staunton Ives is admitted to partnership. . . ."

Truly, the future was rich in promise! So far as the pocket went, his prospects might be counted of the best; if that were all; — but reckoning money-getting as a means and not an end, how infinitely these same prospects might be bettered! The hermit-crab, of course, could exchange his comparatively unpretentious cell for one lined with mother-of-pearl, but he would still be a poor, crabbed thing for all his finery, — when he walked, going backward and alone! The higher state clearly involved companionship; with that well ordered the state must become ideal; and such companionship, perfect as he conceived it to be, now gleamed ever in his mind. To give himself up to contemplation of it was like gazing at the eternal blue of paradise through the rift in that April cloud above his head. Above his head! there was the difficulty. For all his familiarity with it, his ideal seemed still so far away! But exactly how far it stood, in truth, could never be proved without a trial. Failure in attainment would leave him not a whit worse off than he was. And if he triumphed? Why, then, he would be like the white-rose lover in that favorite song of his day and generation: —

". . . it was he that won her
Because he dared to climb!"

How Kelton would smile when he made his clean breast of it! Yes, but Kelton would envy him, too, for a day, at least, — even longer, perhaps, through one of those strange mutations which complicated that cynical figure. Kelton must be an idiot, if he did not grow envious for all time.

Sitting there alone in the little wood, Staunton Ives was overcome by the lover's audacity. At that moment he would have scaled the cloud; but on his way back to town the lover's becoming modesty slowly dimmed the white heat of his adventurous mood. Doubt descended from the impending twilight to envelop him once more, by the time he reached the pavements. In among the herd of men he found no adequate reason why he should rush to the front in a mad hope of preferment above the rest. Divinities had stooped, indeed, to the love of common mortals; witness Diana and her Endymion! Yes, but had not Endymion, being mortal, waited for a sign?

Twilight had come when, striding in along the Avenue, he drew near John Ashley's door. Abreast of it a carriage stopped at the curb, and, illuminating all the dark, his divinity alighted to arrest her wayward mortal's uncertain progress. As at all times, Miss Ashley's unaffected cordiality commanded consideration. She begged him to come in, since it was still so early. It appeared that she had taken a long drive in the country with her uncle, whom she had left at the Turf Club. It had been a lovely afternoon, but here was the chill of winter, reasserting itself at nightfall. She wanted now to sit by the fire and talk—with him. Admitting no denial, she led the way up the steps, and, of course, he followed her.

The big, ugly house had never looked more gaunt and solemn. The light burned low in the silent rooms, where their figures, dimly reflected by the long mirror at the end of the library, stole in upon the solitude like ghosts; but the remnant of a fire flickered on the drawing-room hearth, beside which stood a low table with the tea-tray. Miss Ashley turned up one of the lamps, and they settled down in the chimney-corner; she making tea, while he stirred the embers, until a glow of light, warmth, and comfort irradiated a segment of the surrounding gloom.

Their talk began with swift glances at one subject and another, fluttering lightly like the flame; but the pleasant conditions were prolonged until a personal note became inevitable. Miss Ashley struck it first by asking if Ives was aware of her uncle's increasing regard for him. Mr. Ashley, as it seemed, brought home approval of his prospective partner and had taken some pains to express it. Praise from the right source is always agreeable. Weak man at time will hearken, even though conscious of danger, to the siren's insidious voice. Ives hearkened now, and, caught off his guard, yielding still further to the stimulative narcotic, noted that Miss Ashley said nothing of the partnership. Evidently, here was a bit of news, much to the point, that had not been brought home to her. He was moved to break it then and there; and accordingly he did so, as it were, in confirmation of her uncle's friendliness, producing the printed proof of the announcement to be made public some days hence; sharing thus his small secret with one to whom he felt it would give pleasure. That pleasure was at once made manifest. Miss Ashley, likewise caught off her guard, congratulated him with exclamations of delighted surprise, strong in their emphasis, — stronger, perhaps, than she had intended, — for, suddenly, she broke off in obvious confusion; so, unwittingly, underlining the emphatic speech by her change of color, her downcast eyes. The bolt sped with unerring directness to its mark.

In the moment of startled silence that followed, one rapturous thought made his heart beat wildly. "What! She cares so much!" Upon this hint he spoke, stammering a phrase of thanks, which grew tremulous, incoherent, — by that very incoherence laying bare his soul. He plunged on into a wooing unpremeditated as Othello's; when once the step was taken, gaining clearness, — calmness, too, which, though but superficial, gave him courage. He told her of his doubts, his fears, his extravagant hopes, waiting so long upon a sign; of his remaining always baffled, powerless in the effort to read her thoughts; of placing upon them, even now, an interpretation that might well be false; yet, now, he was unable to withhold his own a moment longer. She did not interrupt; she listened, letting her clasped hands fall into her lap, leaning back in her chair, staring at the fire. He stopped, — began again to speak; floundered helplessly, this time, — stopped once more. Then, half-turning, she looked toward him with a sweet, assenting smile. He sprang up, caught her hands in his, bent down, and kissed her.

A slight noise in the library disturbed them both. Something, there, had fallen with a muffled sound. Miss Ashley sprang up, and they moved from the circle of the light into shadow, turning toward the deeper shadow of the inner room. Both at once distinguished the fallen object, — an open book lying, face downward, upon the floor. Miss Ashley's eyes gleamed with merriment at her lover's consternation.

"But no one is there!" she whispered; and, gliding noiselessly away into the library, stooped to pick up the book.

As she rose to her feet, he saw her start. She waited there a moment motionless, looking beyond her at something that he could not see; then, drawing back, returned with exaggerated precaution, but with the same amusement in her eyes. She handed him the book, — an old copy of Ovid's "Tristia," bound in vellum, — and, laying her finger on her lips, led the way to the farther end of the drawing-room. He followed, wondering.

"What is it? Who is there?" he asked.

"Hush!" she answered, in a whisper. "He is sound asleep. Don't wake him! Mr. Kelton — "

"Kelton!"

"Yes. He must have come in before dark, and has waited all this while, poor soul, for Uncle John. He dropped asleep in his chair over that book. Give it to me!"

She went back to replace the Ovid cautiously where it had fallen, giving at the same time another reassuring glance toward the armchair.

"There!" she said, retracing her steps lightly. "He will wake, and never know!"

But Ives, watching her, had observed that the deep chair, between the fireplace and the library window, turned with its back toward them, must command a view of the drawing-room in the long mirror.

"See!" he said, pointing this out to her. "Are you sure that he does not know already? I am not."

She laughed. "Oh, I am certain of it! All his senses are shut, or he would never have betrayed himself; would he?"

"Who can tell?" said Ives, shrugging his shoulders. "We will cheer ourselves with the doubt. After all, what does it matter? He would be one of the first to know." Then, as the hall-clock struck, he started. "Six o'clock! Good heavens! I must be off, to dress for dinner with the Middlecots. What a nuisance! Shall I fall ill, and leave them in the lurch?"

"No, indeed!" said Dorothy. "That would never do. You must go."

She followed him out into the hall, where they had many last words, in which they agreed upon a plan of action. Their important secret was to be kept for some days profoundly from all but Mr. Ashley, whom she would tell at the first convenient opportunity. The compact was reached after reference to her engagement list, whereon were noted several coming events in which Ives was not to share. They regarded this as evidence that the world did not yet link them together inevitably, and they rejoiced at it; like others in their happy case, at the moment desiring nothing more than to surprise the world.

When Ives had gone, Dorothy hurried to her room, leaving the unconscious Kelton in the library to recover in his own good time. A little later, at the sound of her uncle's step in the hall, occurred the thought: "He will wake now and stay to dinner"; but when she came down, there was no sign of him; Mr. Ashley said nothing of his presence; the book had been returned to its place upon the shelf of Latin authors. Pondering upon this, she could only infer that the sleeper, awakening unaided, had quietly slipped away without discovery; and of that she was not sorry. It would give her the convenient opportunity she awaited to break her overwhelming piece of news, — after dinner, when coffee was brought into the library, and they were left alone. While her uncle smoked, she would enlighten him. That should be no very difficult matter; yet she could not help wondering how he would take it, and how it was best to begin.

During dinner, Mr. Ashley was in his usual high spirits, playfully disposed to fear that the long drive, taken at his request, might have cut her off from other pleasures. "Did you have any visitors?" he asked.

"Mr. Ives called," said Dorothy, feeling her cheeks flush at mention of the name.

Mr. Ashley smiled, with a word of pleasant comment; but he did not look up, and her heightened color faded away unnoticed.

Murray, the old retainer, murmured something in his master's ear as he passed the salad.

"Eh, what? Mr. Kelton?"

"Yes, sir. I showed him into the library. He said he would wait, sir."

"Ah, well, he got tired of waiting, I suppose; but this is his night, — he left no message, did he?"

"No, sir. None at all."

"I see," mused Mr. Ashley. "Then he will be here for chess. Now, that 's just like Kelton, — to make off, only to come back. He might have stayed!"

Dorothy's cheeks burned again like coals of fire. She bent over her plate, dreading an inconvenient question which must have led to others. It never came, however. The awkward minute passed; but she recovered self-possession only when her uncle's thought turned of its own accord a different way. Murray must surely have perceived her confusion; but then Murray did not count.

The moment came when they sat in the library before the fire with the coffee between them; the moment to introduce her exciting subject and tell her tale. Yet she hesitated before beginning, in an effort to find some simple means of preparation for the great event. Suddenly, the most natural one in the world flashed into her mind.

"Oh, Uncle John!" she began; "Mr. Ives has just told me the news of your taking him into partnership. I was so glad to hear it."

"So he stole a march upon me, the rascal! I meant to tell you that, myself. Yes, we take him in on the fifteenth. It 's an excellent thing for him and for us, too. He has ability and a very clear head, — now that the bee in his bonnet is definitely driven out."

"'The bee in his bonnet'? I don't understand, uncle."

"Why, the dramatic one, I mean. As long as that lasted, we could n't be sure of him; but now that he has given it up — "

"Given up what? Not writing for the stage?"

"Yes, altogether, thank heaven!"

Dorothy gasped, still doubtful if she had heard aright. Then it occurred to her that, since the withdrawal of "The Loadstone," Ives and she had talked little of the theatre, and not at all of his own plans concerning it. She had understood his disappointment in that small fiasco, and, out of delicacy, had refrained from even a remote reference to the painful subject, waiting for his lead. That had never come; but, even now, she could not at once accept the too obvious explanation.

"Oh, uncle, with all his talent!" she cried. "It can't be that he will never write again!"

"That is his avowed intention, my dear, or you can be sure that we should have little use for him. No man can serve two masters equally well. We want all, when we want anything. As for the talent, that is a poor, uncertain spark to rely upon, at best; in nine cases out of ten, an *ignis fatuus*, — a jack-o'-lantern, — in other words, a curse to its possessor! Ives saw the point, and he discarded it voluntarily, with no hint on our part. The moment he did that, his value to us increased tenfold."

Dorothy felt herself grow hot and cold by turns, while her face clouded with vexation.

"I can't bear to think of it!" she cried, indignantly. "When he had begun so well! Nor do I see at all why it was necessary."

A moment's pause followed this outburst. Mr. Ashley stirred uneasily in his chair, before he answered gravely: —

"It was necessary, essential, I assure you. I like Ives so much that I would save him from the smallest mistake if any word of mine could do it; but I am convinced that in this he has made none. Consider the man's future. The triumphs to which the other course might lead are ephemeral, dangerous, ending more probably than not in bitter disappointment. He has been clear-sighted enough to discover that himself, — to build not upon the clouds, but upon what I conceive to be a sure foundation; and I like him so much the more."

Dorothy did not look up. She tried to speak, but faltered as if argument failed her; then dropped back with her cheek upon her hand, while Mr. Ashley watched her in troubled silence.

"He might have tried!" she said at last, coldly.

"He had the courage to be reasonable, and not romantic," continued Mr. Ashley in the same tone; "negative, if you please, but hard to find. The courage to say 'No' at a critical moment is almost as rare as that of two o'clock in the morning. Think of what was involved. Look at the question in the broader way, before you condemn him hastily."

Dorothy's mind was still in an angry whirl; but she had recovered outward self-possession, and had suddenly determined to withhold her secret for the present. That could wait; if only her incautious fervor had not stirred him to suspicion! Restraining herself, with well-counterfeited indifference, she said lightly: —

"Why should I condemn Mr. Ives? It is his own affair. His work interested me; if there is to be no more of it, I am sorry; but, of course, the question has two sides."

She was sure that she had thrown him off the scent, when he echoed her own lightness in his response: —

"That's it, — that's just it! We must look at the matter broadly, my dear. As he is to be associated with us, it won't do to prejudice ourselves against him."

That his chain of reasoning had not fully convinced her, he knew; but he concealed his thought successfully, and she was quite in error as to its possible drift, which dealt only with the future. He wanted her to like Ives sufficiently well to listen to him some day, perhaps. Far from imagining that the day had come already, he was not, really, on the scent at all.

Thus their debate languished under a flag of truce, leaving them at cross-purposes. She was content to have beguiled him completely, as she fancied. He congratulated himself upon putting her thoughts in train for settlement upon a reasonable basis with his few well-chosen words. Surely, all needed now would be quiet reflection and time.

The absorbing topic had been dismissed, and what other might have succeeded it is matter only of conjecture; for, just then, the library door opened, admitting Mr. Kelton.

To John Ashley no interruption could have been more opportune. He hailed it cordially.

"I thought you had forgotten," he said. "Why on earth didn't you stay to dinner?"

"I had a dinner appointment at the club," Kelton explained; "and dropped in on my way, for a moment only. Murray said you were overdue, so I waited. You never came. I fell sound asleep, and all but missed my man. Your easy-chair is too easy, — 'softer than the soft Sybarite's!' It's a snare and a delusion."

Speaking, he shook hands with Dorothy, who could detect no mental reservation in his guileless eyes. "I was right, — he does not know!" she thought, with an emphasis of satisfaction.

She brought the chess-table, and sat calmly by it while they made their opening moves. Then, turning away into the drawing-room, she went to her desk and pretended to write notes there, until they were deep in the game. Her mood was a restless one which she feared to betray; she would have liked to pace the room until it wore off. Instead of that, she snatched up the nearest book, and established herself in her usual place by the fire. The pages were blank to her, but she took care to turn them now and then, feeling that her uncle's inward eye, at least, must be upon her; as, indeed, it was. He lost the first game in an abstracted fit, by a foolish mistake, which his opponent, who seemed to be in fine form, deplored. During the second, he rallied somewhat, winning after a hard struggle; but only by recourse to the adjustment of more than one hasty play with that conventional "J'adoube!" which, commonly, Kelton pronounced oftener than he.

While the third game was in progress, Mr. Ashley, looking up, caught Dorothy at an unwary moment. It became clear to him that she was not reading, but absorbed in some problem of a perplexing nature. "Views, — views! They will be the death of her!" he thought; and made a false move which he discovered too late for recall. Eventually, that defeated him. Kelton went off, happy in his victory. Dorothy, laying down her book, withdrew after a cheery good-night, framed to deceive, but not deceptive in the least. It was Mr. Ashley, not she, who paced the drawing-room, which now he had all to himself. As he turned at the little table by the fire, he noticed the book lying where she had left it, and stopped, impelled by sudden eagerness to know upon what, professedly, her mind had been employed. He took it up, let it fall in amazement, to resume his walk impatiently; for the book was a city report, — dry, statistical, of the smallest conceivable interest to her. "She never read a line of it!" he muttered.

Here was proof that she had taken this problem of hers very seriously. Crediting himself with the fullest knowledge of its import, he was much distressed by the fact. How should he deal with it and with her? He passed the next hour pondering that question. To argue with her to-morrow gently yet insistently, in the hope of subduing her in the end to the dictates of his reason, seemed at first the best possible course; but he had tried argument, apparently without effect. What could be more irritating than unwise interference? He had spoken clearly, incisively; had said, perhaps, all he could say, though he were to exhaust hours in eloquent iteration. A safer course, probably, would be to trust her to work out the problem in her own way. Why should he interfere? Why meddle with matchmaking, like a foolish old woman? Ives was no colt, but full-grown, sound, kind, intelligent, capable of taking care of himself. All must come right in time. Did not time and the hour run through the roughest day? To time, then, he left it; and went to bed pleased with his own sagacity, unaware that his premises were at fault, — since time had overshot his reckoning and the hour had struck already.

XI

"J'ADOUBE!"

Of the dinner-party, that night, at Mrs. Middlecot's, Ives, an hour afterward, could remember little, except that he had taken in Miss Alice Orbitt. His hostess, however, did not fail to notice his high spirits, upon which she commented favorably to her husband when the two were left alone; while her guest was hurrying home, there to sit up into the small hours over his first love-letter. Later in the morning this was dispatched to Miss Ashley with a box of roses. He was to have taken a long walk with her in the afternoon; but an incident unforeseen deferred their meeting until the next day; for Ives, upon going to his office, was at once ordered out of town upon important business. He had but time to write a hurried explanation of his enforced absence and take the train for an all-day enterprise peculiarly vexatious to one in his frame of mind. The return train brought him back late in the evening, worn out with the day's work, which yet had gone so well as to leave him reasonably cheerful at the close of it. He would have been entirely so, had he found an answer from Dorothy awaiting him; but there was nothing. The disappointment, at first, seemed intolerable; indeed, it gave him an uneasy night, though he did his best to reason it away. She would have trusted her response to the post, naturally enough, as he reflected; and hours of delay were the natural consequence. Word would come from her in the morning.

Morning brought, in fact, an envelope addressed to him in her hand; but it contained only her card with a penciled line of thanks for the flowers, declaring further that she would expect him in the afternoon to take the walk proposed. The curtness of this was keenly disappointing. "She might, at least, have signed!" he thought; then, at once began to make excuses for her. The handwriting was irregular and uncertain, as he perceived, — hardly recognizable. She had been tremulous, disturbed, — agitated, without doubt, by novelty of circumstance, by difficulties of expression on paper with what seemed becoming calmness. His letter to her must have erred on the sentimental side. He could not recall the exact terms of it; he only knew that he had let himself go — too far, possibly — with unmeasured joy that, perhaps, proved to her overpowering. She would be more considerate, or, rather inconsiderate, as he really hoped, when they met; and that was to be so soon; a final thought which served to dispel all vague uneasiness better than his cumbrous reasoning.

On his way uptown, in the afternoon, he stopped at a jeweler's to get a ring for her; but found there a display so bewildering in its variety that choice became difficult. The jeweler, who was an old acquaintance, discreetly tried to help him in this. Finally, at the man's suggestion, he made off with two rings, between which his friend, unidentified, might choose at pleasure. He pocketed these in some confusion, and came away smiling over his own embarrassment. The transaction, new to him, was so clearly commonplace to the dealer in gifts! Yet, for the moment, it had seemed to publish his secret to the world; and he stepped into the crowded street, wearing still an absurdly conscious look, as if each passer-by must know his errand. Every lover, since Adam's fall, has been granted this heritage of Eden, — to think himself, for a brief space, the only lover in the world.

It did not make him uneasy to find Dorothy waiting at the door, dressed for the walk; though, as she came down the steps to meet him, he was obliged abruptly to suppress his natural demonstrativeness. They clasped hands in a formal way, openly, with the world's eye upon them; then turned up the Avenue together, while he accounted eagerly, excitedly, in an undertone, for their annoying separation of the previous day. Suddenly, he broke off, startled into the first definite alarm by something never seen in her before, — a constraint of manner, a troubled look, a pallor perceptible even through her veil. She listened, but unresponsively, seeming not to heed, silent, cold, with thoughts as well as eyes averted.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Something has happened!"

"Yes," she admitted; "something has happened — something that I must tell you. How can I tell you?"

"Good heavens! What? You have had bad news — of illness — death?"

"No; nothing of that kind. It is only about myself. I am very weak, very foolish, but —"

"But?" he repeated, half suspecting now, yet refusing to understand. "What on earth are you saying?"

"When you spoke to me the other day, I answered you too hastily. I have found it out. I must take back the answer, that is all."

"All! Take it back! Dorothy, think what that means! The other day? Why, you gave me your answer not forty-eight hours ago!"

"I know; that is the cruel part of it. I am horribly to blame, and you will never understand."

"Here comes Tom Trent!" he whispered, looking at her with a forced smile as the friend passed and, in passing, exchanged salutations with them. The moment's interval brought him the thought that this change in her might be overcome with comparative ease, if it were not taken too seriously. To laugh the trouble down, perhaps, would be best.

"I think I understand already," he resumed, striving to make his tone a light one. "That a woman should accept a man — any man — for the asking has always been a matter of surprise to me. How should she decide so grave a question upon the instant? The man is sure, because it has been long determined. This case reminds me of the late Mrs. Browning. Do you remember her verses? —

> '"Yes!" I answered you last night:
> "No!" this morning, sir, I say.'

Your doubt is entirely natural; but, as a man convinced, it is my duty to convince you."

In spite of himself his voice trembled, broke. Yet he glanced at her and smiled again,—this time, hopefully.

Returning neither smile nor glance she looked straight before her at the western sky, and shook her head. "No; No!" she murmured.

There was a long silence, during which they walked on at a quickened pace. Other friends passed; he greeted them mechanically, with no attempt to assume cheeriness, absorbed in thought. Clearly, as he reflected, the laughing method would not do. They were almost out of town now, and a stretch of vacant footway lay before them. Secure from interruption, possessed by a new idea, he spoke again.

"Will you not let me know how this came about?" he asked. "At least, you should do that. Your uncle? He disapproved?"

"No, no, it is not that."

"Then you did not speak to him of me."

"Yes, I spoke of you, but in a general way. I told him nothing. We talked of the partnership. Tell me," she continued, turning toward him with an approach to the old warmth of manner, "is it true that you have given up writing altogether?"

"Ah, you heard of *that* from Mr. Ashley!"

"He referred to it as a condition of your agreement—an essential one."

"Essential, no doubt; but it was my own independent resolution, reached before the agreement was even suggested. I see! It was this fact, suddenly discovered, which shook your faith in me."

"No, don't misunderstand. The news did set me thinking, — I admit that, no more than that. The doubt arose later of my readiness to — to feel as you felt; the certainty that I could not, last of all."

"It is my own fault, then. I should, myself, have explained my decision to you. It came from that inner bar of judgment, before which, at times, we all must stand. I took counsel with myself, reviewed my work, its achievement, its promise, its perplexities. There were lions in the path. I saw plainly that, though with patience I might overcome them, golden mediocrity, after all, was the best result awaiting me. In other words, I was foredoomed to failure; for I am not divinely gifted; neither have I the sustaining power of the true artist, nor his sensitiveness to inspiration. My work is but an echo. 'The sound is forced, the notes are few!' Twice in one day I received a warning from men who are masters in the arts they follow. I heeded it, — wisely, as I believe. My own facility was a treacherous lure, a snare which I shook off in time. To recognize one's own weakness is, surely, the nobler part, rather than that of shallow persistence. This is a sad confession. Blame me for being forced to make it, not for my heroic choice. Really, it was one."

"I see the difficulties. As to the blame, there could be none on my part. It is you who have the right to overwhelm me with reproaches; but, as I said before, please understand that neither your decision, for which I am very sorry, nor my sudden knowledge of it, has caused the change in me. This came from the discovery that I could not keep my promise, — too late, and yet in time. As to my reasons, there are none to give. One does not know one's reasons. I have found out the simple truth, that is all. It was kinder, surely, to tell you so at once; and I have tried to do the kindest thing, hard as that is for both of us. Once more, I entreat you to understand, and, if you can, to forgive me, Mr. Ives."

"Mr. Ives!" The formal words seemed to cut the air, opening an immeasurable gulf between them. Now, they were out of town, walking in the mellow afternoon light straight toward the hillock where, so short a time before, he had yielded to his dream of happiness. He shivered at the thought; and, though they walked alone, remote from intruders, at first he could not speak. Away from all things they hurried on, hurrying, as it appeared to him, out of the world. Then, at last, incoherently he broke the oppressive silence.

"I can't believe it! It is incredible! You are horribly sure, — too sure! You will change again."

She shook her head. Then, stopping, looked up, suddenly conscious of the quiet land beyond them. "We have come too far," she said; "we must turn back." And as they did so, she continued: "No! Don't mistake. There is no doubt in my mind, none!"

He stared before him at the town, over which an east wind, sprung from the sea, blew cuttingly, lashing his face. There was the world again, dull, sombre, cold; and they were going back into it, to be no more alone; yet its impending loneliness cut him more keenly than the wind.

"You will not change, then!" he said, mournfully. "I might argue with you,—might plead, I suppose, that, loving you as I do, I am the only man for you in all the town, the world; but knowing you and knowing myself, I know better than that. You will not change. No more shall I! It is the easiest way to prove to you that I am sincere; in fact, it is the only course open to me. I shall wait,—hoping for something, I don't know what; without hope, rather, since you insist upon it."

She had prepared herself, in a kind of terror, for indignation, for accusing words of bitterness, even for something worse,—what she hardly knew,—but something that should express wrath, entirely justifiable. His tone of stubborn despair, with no resentment in it, took her by surprise, quickening her sense of the injury she had done him, touching her in spite of herself. Then the momentary lapse into tenderness passed and left no trace. She closed her heart against it.

"To wait so is useless," she answered, in a firm voice. "You cannot do it long, if you would, since you are human. With you, the change is sure to come,—the blame, too. Do you remember the first time we met, — I mean the first time we talked together, — and my verdict upon the broken engagement? I said, the woman who had changed her mind was wholly inexcusable. Your comment was that the man, in any case, was better off without her. You will come to think this of yourself, and you will end by hating me."

"Why? For what? The mistake you made is hard upon me, very hard, but it was one made without malice. To hate you for that would be unreasonable, impossible. Love is a mysterious force beyond our own control. How could I hope to awaken it in you, until you knew me better? Had you been content to go on, it might have come of itself in a month, — a week; who can say when, or how? You fear to do this, you doubt, and I must recognize that the doubt is not unnatural. In my case, the deed is done, the force created. No word of yours, now, can do away with it. You cannot prevent my caring for you. I shall go on caring to the end."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Ives. I can say no more."

Again they lapsed into silence. As they drew near the town, twilight began to fall, and it seemed easier to them both to press on without speaking. The city lamps flashed up before them, one by one. A carriage brushed by; from it a face leaned out, looking back and smiling. One or two strangers passed, on foot. Other figures approached. They were in the world's eye once more; and for that reason some slight effort at conventionality must now be made.

"How dark it grows!" said Miss Ashley, as if nightfall were a freak of nature never before experienced.

"Yes," he answered. "We are going back into the dark; but, once more, I protest against it. I beg you to reconsider this. Give me some admission of a possible doubt; at least, a little time!"

"It would only be unkind," she rejoined, quickly. Then, after a pause, she added with quiet deliberation: "I like you, that is all; and that is not enough. I can't renew the promise I have taken back; I can't give any hope of its renewal."

"Into the dark!" he repeated. "Well, I shall never trouble you any more, never ask again. Think of me as waiting there, always in the dark, always unchanged, — waiting for a sign from you, if, by chance, you should ever change and give it to me. Please remember that; I shall never speak without it."

To this she made no answer. Night had come; and they hurried forward through the gloom silently, until they reached her door. Turning at the steps, she hesitated for a moment; then held out her hand.

"Good-night!"

"Good-night!" he returned, taking the hand, to clasp it lightly and let it fall.

He stood watching her, as she went on up the steps, into the house. She had not turned, had not looked back. He was left to go his way.

Desiring only to avoid mankind, dodging each passer's face, lest it should be a familiar one, he reached home at last, without encounter or interruption. As he shut the door behind him, his hand struck something in his coat-pocket, — only the jeweler's box which he had forgotten. He pulled it out, and threw it down upon the table; then, dropping into a chair beside it, he hid his face, secured from observation by depths of darkness now, indeed.

XII

THE ORBITT WAY

EACH one of us, in threading the complicated maze of modern life, with all its twistings and turnings, its byways without issue, every step of which we retrace, must at some time have paused to wonder what fertile brain it is that seems to occupy itself so persistently and so ingeniously with signs that fail. Who gives us our false starts, distorting facts to warp the judgment, supplying for existent gaps, if need be, a plausible tissue of probabilities? Who builds up the stories on no foundation whatever, that, like a mirage of the desert, lure us on to believe in their reality, until, at a breath, they crumble into nothing? If we make the pause long enough to give that question mature thought, the answer should be not only easy, but also the same, nine times out of ten. Nobody does it! "'T is in ourselves that we are thus or thus." In other words, poor human nature is so prone to credulity, that it stands ever ready to fabricate instinctively a camel, a weasel, or a whale out of every cloud that drifts before its eyes.

Certain it is that no malicious mind could be proved directly responsible for the current statement, passing from lip to lip and generally accepted unhesitatingly, that Miss Ashley and Mr. Ives were engaged to be married. A rumor to that effect, whispered about for some days, had developed into confident assertion of the fact before either of the two most concerned became aware of it. Then, one morning, on his way downtown Ives was joined by an acquaintance, — a man encountered only in the course of business, and, even so, infrequently, — who, with rare imprudence, seized the opportunity to congratulate him upon his good fortune. Ives, losing self-control, made a denial reproachfully indignant, with incisive comment upon the harmfulness of idle gossip; and he demanded the talebearer's authority for this unfounded bit of news. The man, confused and immediately repentant, could not or would not enlighten him; but defended himself by declaring that he had heard it more than once; that, in fact, it was repeated on all sides. Innocently supposing that what everybody said must be true, he had spoken in good faith, with no sinister motive. He ended by begging Ives's pardon a thousand times. Ives, in turn, begged his. They laughed the matter off, and parted amicably enough, after making an alliance for mutual protection against the world.

Ives, pursuing his way alone, sought vainly some suggestion of a possible source for the mischievous rumor. Had Kelton, apparently asleep in the dark on that fateful afternoon, been really awake? Or, had he wakened in time to hear the closing words of the important conversation? Had the book dropped from his conscious hand as a sign of warning? That might be; but what if it were so? He knew Kelton well enough to know that, if he had come into possession of their secret, he would have guarded it religiously. Whatever had really happened, Kelton, surely, had never spoken.

How, then, had the report originated? Whose was the first impulse which had set it flying on swift, impetuous wings? Suddenly, the victim's mind reproduced one trifling circumstance that he had quite forgotten. On the day of his conclusive interview with Miss Ashley, as they walked in the twilight, a passing face had smiled upon them, or at them, from a carriage window. He could not remember whose face it was; could not even be sure that at the time he had recognized it; but an impression of mocking significance in its aspect, made upon him at the moment, revived now. The person, whoever it may have been, had recognized them, of course; and, in the triumph of discovery, might well have coupled their names together, adding no more, perhaps, than that they had engaged in earnest conversation out of town, under cover of darkness. Here was quite enough to set a good story coursing through vacant brains. The fact that the hour of its origin closely corresponded with what to every one must seem the turning-point in his career, namely, his admission to the house of Ashley and Company, would have helped to give the story definite shape, — if any help were needed; for the cloud, of its own impulse, might easily have assumed fallacious likeness as it drifted on. The weasel had so nearly proved a whale, after all, that a slight mistake in defining it was no cause for surprise.

To Ives, however, there was abundant cause for irritation in the chance thrust that inflamed his hidden wound. Nothing could be done about it, of course; nothing could be said, except to contradict it when occasion offered. He heartily wished that people would mind their own business; but when did they ever do this? No; they would go on talking and imagining until their bubble collapsed or inflation exhausted itself. He prayed that this might occur before the insubstantial fabric floated Miss Ashley's way; even though the annoyance therefrom, on her side, must be of the slightest. She would probably smile and let it pass. He was the real sufferer, not she.

During these first days of what seemed to him supreme disaster, he walked, as it were, in shadow; while the world, in full sunlight, brushed by him, unheeding to all appearance his own want of exhilaration. His one comfort was in the enforced routine of a busy life. He made no confidants. His most intimate friend, apart from Kelton, was, perhaps, Tom Trent; but others came very near, skirting the shadow's edge, and, if these observed unaccustomed gravity in his demeanor, they probably took it for no more than a natural consequence of the new cares which he had assumed; at all events, they never found the change worth mentioning. With Trent and Kelton, particularly the latter, Ives made a special effort at high spirits whenever they drew near, acting a part for their benefit, — successfully, so far as he was able to judge; they, at least, upon no just ground could challenge him for dejection.

To forswear the world formed no part of his plan, as soon as he could command his thoughts sufficiently to frame one. On the contrary, like many a rejected suitor before him, he exerted himself to become one of society's most restless devotees, with a view to self-forgetfulness solely, as in all sincerity he surely would have insisted; though it is far from improbable that a substratum of self-consciousness underlay in some measure this heroic resolution. If there lurked in him, unacknowledged, a desire to try the effect of studied indifference upon the indifferent being who had left him in the lurch, no flaw to which defective human nature has fallen heir would have been more likely than this to mar his own integrity. Certain it is that he never entered a room without looking for her eagerly. Why, if his one wish were to forget the unhappiness of which she was the cause? That searching question would have been hard to parry, had any one attacked him with it.

For some time, as it happened, all his eagerness was wasted. No dinner-table at which he sat included her among the guests; nor did he discover her afar off in any larger gathering. Once, indeed, came the opportunity of a meeting by which he was unable to profit. Mr. Ashley, one afternoon, on the spur of the moment, asked him to dine without formality. Happily, or otherwise, he could not determine which, another engagement put temptation out of his reach. As he politely regretted this, Mr. Ashley's eyes seemed fixed upon him with unusual intentness; but he did not wince; the awkward moment passed; and he concluded afterward that his impression of it must have been purely imaginary, due, perhaps, to private knowledge of a reason for declining, other than the all-sufficient one alleged. Mr. Ashley had not known; so much was evident; and if another invitation were given, why, he should accept it! Things must take their natural course; he would not change the order of them in the least to avoid a little unpleasantness; on the contrary, he would stand his ground manfully, and play the game.

Days went on, the season drew near its end, but Mr. Ashley's kindly hospitality was not proffered a second time. It appeared as if the leading man in this comedy of manners must postpone indefinitely the thrilling moment of dramatic indifference for which he had girded himself with care. Then there came a note that made him hopefully apprehensive. It was from Mrs. Caspar Orbitt, asking Mr. Ives to meet "a few friends informally," at eight o'clock, on the next Friday evening.

Ives smiled as he read it. The simple form of entertainment, which belonged, clearly, to the old-fashioned "conversazione" order, the short notice, the early hour all accorded so well with Mrs. Orbitt's ideas of rationality. "Talk, and nothing else!" he muttered; "at the fag-end of everything, when half the town has moved out of it!" He recalled, however, a remark of Mrs. Middlecot which reassured him. "It is all very well to laugh at the Orbitts," she had said once;

"but their house saves society from degeneration; they think high things!" To this article of grace he now appended a postscript: "And where Mrs. Middlecot is, things are never dull!" She was still in town, as he knew, and would certainly be there; so would he, on her account, if on no other; and he accepted Mrs. Orbitt's kind invitation forthwith.

Nevertheless, Ives could not bring himself to take the stated hour literally; and, thus, although he was a near neighbor of the Orbitts, he came late upon the sounds of revelry which pervaded their quiet cross-street at the top of the hill. On that warm May night all windows were wide open, and, in turning the corner, he caught a confused chatter of many voices. He saw, too, a gleam of light garments in the small side garden, which, as an inheritance from the remote past, it was Mr. Orbitt's pride and privilege to maintain. The fun had reached its height, if fun it could be called.

The hostess conveyed reproach for his late arrival only by one expressive, fleeting look, which instantly converted itself into cordial welcome, properly dignified. Then, rejoining a group, which for the moment seemed closely to engage her, she graciously dismissed him; and he moved on into the inner drawing-room, where stood his host in conversation with a stout woman whose face was turned away, so that, at first, Ives did not recognize her.

Mr. Orbitt grasped his hand and clung to it long enough to present him to their companion, who proved to be none other than the sprightly tea-dispenser of the oasis, Mrs. Goff Canterbury.

"Oh, but I know *him* already!" she declared. "We 're old friends, are n't we, Mr. Ives?" Then, as the host discreetly slipped away in his turn, she whispered: "How am I looking? Do I do, do you think?" And moving back a few paces, she made on tiptoe a light revolution, airily wafted as if by no guidance of her own, that Ives might inspect her critically upon all sides.

He expressed laughing approval, when she had settled down again. To him, indeed, she appeared like a fashion-plate of the latest vogue, in tints that invidious judgment might have pronounced too young; yet they suited her admirably.

"Everything is new, you see," she explained, "and I wanted a man's opinion. It 's a real event for me to get out into the world; I had it made on purpose. My husband does n't count, for he 's a babe in arms when it comes to clothes, just as you 'd know he 'd be; but, then, perhaps, you don't notice clothes either. Whether you do or don't, I 'm not to blame the least little bit. Dorothy chose it for me."

His interest and enthusiasm waxed perceptibly. "It is perfection!" he decided. "Is Miss Ashley here?"

"Oh, yes; she 's somewhere round," said Mrs. Canterbury, with carelessness in which he might have detected an undercurrent of care, had he not been caught unguarded. "That reminds me; give me your arm, if you don't mind, and let us walk about a little. I have a message for you."

"From her?" he asked, with reckless indiscretion.

"No, from Gibbon Place, — Kitty Colt; she says you never come there nowadays. If I saw you here, I was to ask you to dine with them next Sunday, at seven. No clothes, — not these you're wearing now, I mean; you understand."

"Yes, I understand;" said Ives, laughing; "and I will come — please say so — with the greatest pleasure."

"Ah, I'm very glad, because — Is that a Copley over there? Let's look at it! No, not a bit like him; it's only a Harding."

"Because?" repeated Ives, with a secret hope of bringing back the name which seemed to have conjured up remembrance of the invitation. Mrs. Canterbury's methods were inconsequent, however, and the hope was not realized; yet her reply proved sufficiently surprising to divert his thoughts into another channel without betrayal of their first course.

"Because," she answered, "Mr. Jarvis seems to have taken a great fancy to you, — as far as I can make out, on account of your not doing things. They're made that way, these artists. They don't appear to care about flocking together, somehow; they like people who are different. I suppose that's why Mr. Canterbury married me. I never could see any other reason."

"I think I comprehend," said Ives, perceiving the profound truth that underlay her cogitations thus crudely set forth. “They tire of over-application to the shop. Outside of it they seek refreshment in companionship altogether foreign to their pursuits and the more delightful. ‘All work and no play’ — you know the rest. Meeting their own kind, they must hark back to what absorbs them most; that ’s natural enough; they can’t help it.”

“No,” assented Mrs. Canterbury, reflectively; “and they have to be adored, too, — it ’s meat and drink to them. They can’t help that, either.”

“Very true!” laughed Ives, recognizing another shrewd hit in her philosophy; “and we, who can do nothing else, do that well.”

Mrs. Canterbury echoed the laugh, adding thereto a confidential wink of approbation. “Ah!” she cried; “you and I understand ’em! Don’t we?”

“Clever woman, — and deep!” said Ives to himself; and at that moment, from acquaintances, the two were transformed into sworn friends.

She was more than deep, in fact, since even her shallows were dangerously deceptive. “What ’s going on there?” she asked, referring to shouts of laughter that were borne in upon them through an open window. Then she drew him along with her out upon a balcony whence a short flight of steps led down into the Orbitt garden, which, from their post at the railing, they overlooked.

A merry company of youthful figures had formed a ring upon the central grass-plot, to steal a short backward march upon Time in the childish game of throwing the handkerchief. The victim, for the moment, was Miss Ashley, who stood in the middle of the ring, vainly trying to catch the fluttering missile which flew back and forth above her head. Ives had scarcely identified that gleaming figure all in white, when the handkerchief was flung up within his reach. Instinctively, he leaned out and caught it; then deliberately threw it back, straight into Miss Ashley's hands.

Dorothy made room for herself in the ring amid a storm of protest. She had caught out an intruder who was not in the game. Either he must take her place, or she must return to it. Ives solved the difficulty by descending from his perch to challenge the field defiantly; thereby giving their sport new impetus, which kept it alive a few minutes longer. In the course of these, he found himself, quite by accident, standing beside Miss Ashley in the boisterous circle. Not till then had she acknowledged his presence; and now she did so only with a gracious smile; then turned away, absorbed in the game which, indeed, enforced attention. When the end came, the two were far apart; and he took care neither to seek for her, nor to give even so much as a fleeting glance toward that segment of the circle where she had last been visible. Joining Miss Orbitt, instead, with marked intention, he followed her up the steps into the house.

She had been caught out among the last, and still panted from the unusual exertion; so that, observing a sofa vacant in one of the smaller rooms, they seated themselves there together. Through the wide doorway into the back drawing-room they looked upon a distant group, charged with small talk, of which Mrs. Canterbury in her new costume and Mrs. Middlecot, scarcely less resplendent, were the central figures.

"How very good of you to do that!" said Miss Orbitt, when, with returning breath, her thoughts were collected; "Dorothy had been at it ever so long."

"Oh, that! Don't give me undeserved applause. I had n't seen, you know; I clutched the thing mechanically, just because it happened to be there, — as the drowning man does his straw!"

"It was n't that, but what you did with it after the clutch, that I referred to."

"Oh, *that*, you mean! but I was mechanical then, too; I did the first thing that occurred to me."

"Precisely; a happy occurrence, — for Dorothy was worn out, and must have been most grateful."

"I hardly think so. She has n't expressed her gratitude, at any rate; she took it quite as a matter of course, as I meant it should be taken."

"You did mean it, then; I thought I observed accurately. Never mind! Since you won't hear of it, let me congratulate you upon something else. I have n't seen you since that happened, and — "

"But that is not true!" said Ives, hastily interrupting her.

"Not true? Why, I thought — I saw it, myself, in the papers."

"In the papers?" he repeated, almost groaning with anguish.

"Of course; surely, you published it yourself."

"Published it myself? What on earth do you mean?"

"Your promotion — admission — what is the word I want? — with Ashley and Company."

"Oh, *that!* I did n't understand. Thanks, yes! I am very much obliged. I — " and he covered embarrassment with a forced laugh, inwardly cursing his own stupidity.

"Ah!" said Miss Orbitt, mystified by his behavior; "it 's really true, then. I began to think that I had spoken too soon." Here, the cause of the misunderstanding suddenly dawned upon her. She gasped; and, feeling her cheeks burn with confusion, echoed his laugh hysterically. Then, control of speech was swept away. To make a bad blunder infinitely worse, she stammered out: "I beg your pardon for misleading you. I ought to have explained more clearly."

"And I beg yours!" he retorted, flinging himself headlong into the breach; "I might have known you couldn't — that is, you would n't — I should have understood at once, I mean — "

There, coherence came back; and in well-rounded phrases he descanted upon his good fortune and its significance to himself. The new affairs had engrossed him so much, as already to seem old; it was all most interesting, yet difficult; he appeared to be feeling his way in the dark, but hoped to pull himself out with more or less dexterity, some day.

Miss Orbitt heard without heeding. She could not have repeated a single word of all that fluent exposition, which gained her time, however, to free herself from a dangerous quicksand and establish foothold upon solid earth. She, too, floundered out from darkness into light, and, ere long taking the lead, directed their talk to obvious, innocuous things; to Mrs. Canterbury's color-scheme and to Mrs. Middlecot's, together dominating all the distance; and to various other subjects, commonplace yet not without importance, from which love and marriage were carefully excluded.

They were thus afloat in the air, buoyantly enough, if not far from the ground-level, — rather like two toy-balloons in their second state, lacking an appreciable quantity of uplifting vapor, — when Mr. Orbitt, interposing himself in a material frame of mind, rudely jolted them back to earth.

"Alice, isn't supper ready? or aren't we to have any?"

"Of course, papa; what time is it?"

"After ten,—but your mother is on a high plane to-night, and I didn't know — "

What followed Ives didn't know either; for, seizing that opportunity, he made off into the other room and paid his respects to Mrs. Middlecot.

He knew at once that she had heard the rumor about him; but, when in good behavior, she could be the embodiment of tact; and her present mood was not openly mischievous.

"What a heart-to-heart talk you have had with the best of all the Orbitts!" she remarked, probably by way of disarming suspicion. "My eye is ever on you!"

"I wish no worse eye ever was," he retorted.

"Alice is just a dear!" she went on; "I'm very fond of her. All, with her, is open and aboveboard, so to speak. She has no involutions."

"I have always heard her well spoken of," he assented. "She suffers, I believe, from no lack of appreciation."

Mrs. Middlecot laughed. "What a calm one you are!" said she. "I always forget how well you have yourself in hand. Why is it that I am always tempted to give you warnings, I wonder, — of which there is never the remotest need?"

"I hope it is because I inspire a little more than your usual interest in my kind," he replied, gallantly. "I should be very glad if it were so; for man, single-handed, is a poor, defenseless animal. Have you any solemn warning now for my receptive ear?"

"None whatever. I was thinking of another time; and if I had one now, I should await a better moment, when you really wanted to listen."

"Thanks; but you will have to take my word for that, I suppose."

"Not at all! I shall know intuitively. When you really — *really* — want help, fall into line, and you will see!"

"Thanks, again; in the mean time, I am at your orders."

"Are you really — *really?* Then — "

What order she was about to issue can never be known; for, as at that inopportune moment came a general move toward the supper-room, his new commanding officer promptly changed her mind. "Then get me something to eat!" was the extent of her bidding in its amended form; and they fell into line together.

The commission, apparently simple, was not so easy to execute as it seemed; for their hostess had enlightened ideas about supper, and some of the dishes most to be expected were not forthcoming. Mrs. Middlecot's appetite went unappeased, at first; nothing that she naturally suggested could be found.

"Well, get me anything," she said, desperately, after several negative reports from her emissary. "What are those lovely pink-and-white pyramids that I descry afar off? A bit of one will do."

Ives laughed. "Excuse me, but I don't think it will," he whispered; "they are mounds of popped corn, — decorative, but dry! How many bits shall I bring you?"

"Not one. Anything but that, anything you please!"

"Not what I please, but what I can!" he replied, departing for another dive at the table.

Thence, presently, he returned, with a plate of salad for her and another for himself. Eating, they discussed it, striving to determine of what it was composed; but, when all was said and done, this remained in doubt. They had eaten, agreeing that the mixture was palatable, failing to agree upon its make-up.

He did not see Miss Ashley again, and already there were signs of dispersal. When the full tide was setting homeward, he found Mrs. Middlecot once more, and called her carriage.

"It was made of herbs and apples," she said, as they went down the steps. "A salad truly Emersonian; I must ask for the receipt."

From the carriage she leaned out, smiling, for a final word.

"Good-night! In spite of all the charm, I would think twice, if I were you, before going on to the end."

"Going where?" he asked, slamming the door as the horses started up.

"The Orbitt way!" she called back, and was gone.

XIII

ON THE SKIRMISH-LINE

TURNING into Gibbon Place a little before the dinner-hour on the next Sunday evening, Ives saw his hostess, Miss Kitty Colt, at one of her open ground-floor windows. She hailed him heartily, and flew to the door to admit him herself, with cordial absence of ceremony.

"Well, I *am* glad to see you," she declared; "a nice, prompt, early bird, as ever was! Mr. Jarvis is just down. Come in, do! You 're such a stranger!"

The actor, bent over the dusty grate, was engaged in knocking the ashes from his pipe. He straightened up at once to welcome the guest warmly; then drew him to the nearer window-seat where they established themselves together, while Miss Colt fluttered about the table, which Ives perceived to be set for six persons. As, in the back of his mind, he conjectured concerning the three who were yet to come, Mr. Canterbury ambled by the window and slipped noiselessly into the room.

"Ah, Goff, my precious!" said Mr. Jarvis. "Here is Mr. Ives; you know Mr. Ives."

Goff gravely believed he had had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Ives before. He did not attempt, however, to specify time and place, — wisely, perhaps, as Ives could not help reflecting.

"Sit down, Goff!" continued his old friend; "though why we say 'down' I don't know, — it's absurd! Who can sit at all, without sitting down?"

"Goff can!" laughed Miss Colt, with a wave of the hand toward the globe-maker, precariously perched, bolt upright, on the edge of the chair she had brought him; "but, then, he does things nobody else can do!"

"Nonsense!" Mr. Canterbury protested, shifting uneasily to a position more comfortable, at least, in appearance. "I'm normal, — or as near the embryonic norm as a married man is permitted to be!"

"Speaking of that, why are you here alone?" Mr. Jarvis asked; "where are the ladies?"

"Coming directly, God willing! Matters went wrong with Lois at the last moment, — a question of hooks and their adjustment. I was called in, but sent away as useless. It's apt to be like that. Plenty of things, Kitty, I can't do!"

"Just because you don't try, that's all," Miss Colt retorted. "And more shame to you! A married man ought to learn what's expected of him."

"Of course he ought!" chuckled Adam Jarvis. "Goff, you have n't a leg to stand on. Happy are the bachelors, of whom nothing is expected, who never disappoint, — Mr. Ives knows that. But cheer up, old man; all things get self-adjusted, somehow, for him who shirks, — and here the ladies come!"

Ives turned too late to catch a glimpse of her as she passed; but, at the door, Miss Colt spoke her name; he heard her voice, likewise, and knew that his premonitions were verified. He thus had a moment in which to gather himself together with assumed tranquillity, before Miss Ashley, followed by Mrs. Canterbury, made her way in.

She had been warned of his presence, undoubtedly; and the awkward moment for him seemed to have no awkwardness for her. She gave him her hand as gracefully and as coolly as she would have done to any friend with whom she stood upon agreeable terms, disregarding the nervous tremor in his grasp which he could not altogether repress. He was indignant with himself for playing his part less skillfully than she played hers; but then she was a born actress; she had given him evidence of that in this very room; and with her now, it was as if they had met yesterday, casually, indifferently, and might so meet again to-morrow.

She turned away to laugh lightly with the others; while he, summoned by Miss Colt, rolled the piano-stool into its usual place at Mr. Jarvis's right hand.

"We 'll have it so," decided the mistress of the feast; "you sit here by me, with Lois next you at the end. Dorothy goes at Mr. Jarvis's left, and Mr. Canterbury on her other side. That 's all wrong, I know, putting husband and wife together, but don't tell Goff, — he 'll never notice it, and Lois will have you. Here 's dinner! Mr. Jarvis, you are called!"

Through this haphazard arrangement, as Ives at once perceived, by no accident could he and Miss Ashley be forced to converse apart at the table. It was better so, perhaps; even though at a table of six no two were likely to be left long to themselves. She would be always in full view, at all events; at her best, too, he observed, in a very simple dress, alike becoming and suitable.

"What's the gossip of the greenroom, Adam?" inquired Mr. Canterbury, when the soup was disposed of and the sherry had gone round.

"Well, they say greenrooms are going out; what do you think of that? Ours is one of the last. No new theatres are to have them."

"Did you ever!" broke in Miss Colt, indignantly. "What is to become of the profession, huddled in the entrances like sheep, or penned up in stuffy dressing-rooms?"

"If that's so, look out for Barney Bradish!" chuckled Mr. Canterbury. "He'll throw the Temple greenroom into the manager's office, before you know it. He needs space to expand in. How is it with him, now, Adam? Oil or vinegar? or standing water between the two?"

"Bless the man!" again commented Miss Colt. "He's quoting Shakespeare."

"Why, Goff!" said his wife. "How did that happen?"

"Why should n't a rough mechanic read 'As You Like It' in his leisure moments, — yes, and quote, too, — if he likes it? Has Number Six reserved rights in all the poets, Kitty?"

"No! but if he does, he ought to know what's what," she replied. "That was 'Twelfth Night' you quoted."

"Nonsense! I — "

"Why, it's Malvolio who says it! If Mr. Ives will hand me the Knight, there on the table — "

Mr. Ives, immediately complying, brought the book. Miss Colt briskly turned the pages, ran down one with her forefinger and checked it emphatically. "There! 'Standing water, between boy and man.' I said it was Malvolio, — 'Twelfth Night,' Act I, Scene 5. We know our lines at Number Six, I rather think."

"I sit corrected," admitted Mr. Canterbury. "See how they kick a man when he's down, Miss Dorothy! There's no reverence for age, nowadays."

"You shan't be abused!" Miss Ashley declared.

"That's right! You'll stand by me, even when I'm in the wrong, won't you? Old heads, you see, just because they're old, will expand sometimes; not often, though, — I'm no Barney Bradish!"

"Let Barney alone, do!" said Miss Colt, closing her Shakespeare with a snap and dropping it on the floor at her side. "He has had a change of heart, has Barney. What do you think? He bills Mr. Jarvis's benefit for a Friday, the best night in the week; Friday fortnight, it is, — we must all be there."

A general assent made the modest beneficiary blush with pride, like a boy in his teens. He hoped they would remember to come, for benefits were going out as greenrooms were, and this might be his last. The threatened change led to a discussion, in the course of which Ives asked Miss Colt in an aside what part had been chosen for the benefit.

"Goldfinch, in 'The Road to Ruin,'" she answered, turning to him, while the others talked on among themselves; "do you know it? No? So much the better! He's very strong. I just love the piece, for I used to play Sophia in it; she's young and charming, I'd have you know. One of my hits, it was, — and they keep my business to this day, — the business with the torn letter. You'll see! Heigh-ho!" And Miss Colt heaved a prodigious sigh, half in jest, over the happy reminiscence.

"I wish I could see you as Sophia," returned Ives, gallantly.

"Pshaw! How you talk! as if I — Oh, and they're doing you too, I think. Mr. Jarvis, didn't you say you were to give Mr. Ives's piece, 'Love-in-Idleness,' before the comedy?"

"Yes, to be sure; it's a double bill with Mr. Ives to open. That reminds me; we must drink his health in view of that and other things. Here's to Mr. Ives, and success to him in all his enterprises!"

"Thanks!" rejoined the subject of this unexpected compliment, half amused, half embarrassed by it; "thanks! But —"

The disclaiming clause was hardly worth while, and he left it unfinished, while he watched Miss Ashley's glass raised in his honor with the others. "A little awkward for her, that!" he thought, as she touched it to her lips; but a smile flickered across them, and, though she avoided his look, it was clear that she considered the incident rather diverting than otherwise. "Confound her!" he thought again.

"Mercy!" whispered Mrs. Canterbury to him, while the others debated some question of the benefit; "then you do things, after all. I am so sorry!"

"You need n't be. That was such a little one, — not mine either. I stole it from the French."

"Ah! Perhaps I can bear that; but what did he mean by the other enterprises?"

"Oh, things that don't count; promotion downtown, I suppose, in business matters."

"So, that 's all! I hoped he meant something else, — something quite different —"

"What, for instance?"

"Well, it 's no affair of mine —"

"But mine, evidently. Please tell me."

"Not now, another time." And Mrs. Canterbury addressed herself to the table again, drawing him with her, whether he would or no.

They had turned the old actor back to recollections of early life, and the dinner went gayly on, for the most part in monologue after that. He told stories of his "barnstorming" days, when, as a strolling player, he invaded remote communities, appearing before backwoodsmen and in mining-camps upon improvised stages, where the footlights were made, offhand, by melting candle-ends and fastening them to the boards with their own tallow. The seasons were of one night. They often arrived an hour before the play began, and journeyed on betimes the morning after. It was a rough life, — and yet a merry one. They played a round of parts; young actors had no special line; there seemed to be more talent among them then, and it was burnished, so to speak, by hard and varied use. That, in itself, was a school of acting. There was nothing like that now. The good old plays were rarely revived, or neglected altogether. Their traditions were dying out, — the very prompt-books were lost, but no one missed them. Young actors did not go to school any more. They knew it all, at the start!

"We have still the Temple Theatre, don't forget that!" said Mr. Canterbury. "What better school would you have, with Adam Jarvis at the head of it?"

"At the head of it!" repeated the actor, ironically. "Hear the man!"

"Surely," said Ives, "the company must defer to you, ask your advice and profit by it."

"Ask my advice? They would resent a mere suggestion. It's all Benson, the stage-manager, can do to hold them in. They know it all, I tell you! I'm bellwether of the flock, it's true, but the flock does n't follow the leader. He's an old fogy to be kept at a respectful distance, and — well, ignored. As for his opinion, were he fool enough to express it, they would stare him out of countenance, one and all, and appeal to Benson."

"More shame to 'em for stupid cattle!" snapped Miss Colt, wrathfully.

Mr. Jarvis laughed. "Every dog has his day, and we 've had ours, Kitty," he returned; "we won't complain, if the young dogs begin to enjoy theirs. I, for one, have n't the right, Heaven knows! for my lines still 'get over,' as we say behind the footlights. They accept me 'in front' as a tradition that survives."

Ives lifted his glass. "Here 's to its immortality!" he said, turning toward the veteran, while the others, joining, drank the toast with a shout: "To immortality!"

Mr. Jarvis shook his head, and smiled. "What? On earth?" he inquired.

"That reminds me," mused Mr. Canterbury, "of what the great Italian — the world's Othello — remarked once, here at this table. Do you remember, Adam? The artist's life, he told us, is like our cigar-smoke: we see it, we enjoy it, it vanishes away."

"Right! So it is!" agreed Adam Jarvis. "None of us can be immortal. None of us, I dare say, is weak enough to hope for that, knowing what the public is. We get ours, sometimes, for a moment. To hold it for a moment after is our little utmost, — the 'demnition total' of our best endeavor."

"Oh, Mr. Jarvis, I don't agree with you!" protested Miss Ashley, valiantly. "If I were an artist, I should never be content with that. I should work for something better — a name!"

"Hey! Miss Dorothy!" replied the old comedian, with twinkling eyes. "Go in and get it, and put us all to the blush! I'll be bound you will; but afterward? What would your name be worth, unless it were written in the stars?"

"And even so," urged Goff Canterbury, "stars fade, — yes, and they fall, too. Better trust to the air, Miss Dorothy, for that inscription! It would come to the same thing at last — vanishing away."

"Oh, but I should n't get it!" she answered, with heightened color. "Not one in a million would; yet what would that matter? You don't understand. I should just try, and try, and try, that's all, for something high up, — the very highest, — even though I knew it were beyond me."

Mr. Canterbury growled, and shook his head. "Excelsior!" he muttered.

"I see!" declared Adam Jarvis, chuckling merrily. "A gallery of angels and archangels, with a rise out of 'em, at that! Go in and win, Miss Dorothy, and be satisfied, if you can! Do you remember the story of the peasant-woman in her hovel, granted a favor by the gallery-gods? They made her Emperor; then she wanted to be Pope of Rome, and they made her Pope."

"Well?" said Miss Ashley. "What happened then?"

"Then, she wanted to be Lord of the Spheres. The gods sat back and laughed at her, and tore up the benches. She went home to her hovel."

"Capital!" said Mr. Canterbury. "There's a fine moral in that. I say to you that the way of the artist is to sit at his table and do the work that lies before him as well as he knows how; and let name and fame and immortality go straight to —"

"Goff!" interrupted his wife in a warning note.

"Well, — to Jericho! That's what I say."

"A very excellent argument," resumed Mrs. Canterbury; "I shall remember it the next time I'm darning stockings and you fling the poets at my head. To do the work that lies before me, as well as I know how. If sauce for the gander is n't sauce for the goose, it ought to be!"

"And what do you say, Miss Dorothy, to the excellent argument?" asked Mr. Jarvis.

"I'll remember it, too, — and think it over," she said, laughing. "Not that I am in the least convinced."

"Of course not!" cried Miss Colt, who had rustled into restlessness during the last few minutes. "Nobody ever is convinced; it ends like all discussions — nowhere. Let's get out into the yard! I want to show you my flower-beds. They've done wonders, lately. Come, Lois! Come, Dorothy! We'll leave the men to their tobacco-smoke. There's one thing about that I can tell 'em, if it's any argument. No matter what the big Italian said, it does *not* vanish away!"

She led them out by way of the old kitchen, leaving the men in the twilight to move their chairs toward that end of the room where the fire would have been had the season admitted one. Mr. Jarvis brought cigars, settled into his place in the chimney-corner, and lighted his pipe. While the maid cleared the table and put the reading-lamp upon it, their clouds of smoke went up in silence; but when she, too, had gone, the actor by one or two direct questions lured Ives into a statement of his plans and prospects, displaying so much interest therein that Ives unfolded them very frankly and dwelt upon his relinquishment of dramatic composition. Whereat Mr. Jarvis made his approval so clear as almost to confirm Mrs. Canterbury's lightly drawn conclusion that an appreciable advance in his friendship had been gained through "not doing things."

Naturally enough, perhaps, the implied assumption that his grain of talent was hardly worth cultivating ruffled Ives a little, despite his resolute renouncement. A remonstrance, however slight, would have been soothing, to say the least; but flattery's polite phrases were rare in the old player's vocabulary; the heroic aspirant, coming to himself again, realized this, put vanity to sleep with scarce a struggle, and accepted patiently the bitter commendation of the sage.

"Wise, — wise, — very wise!" went on the comedian; "you have scotched the tarantula, if you have n't killed it. I congratulate you; and Goff, I 'll venture to say, will agree with me."

"Surely, surely," answered Mr. Canterbury, puffing a cloud of smoke to the ceiling. "If the tarantula is really dead, you are safe and sound. If not, he 'll wake and bite again; and when he does, my boy, remember this! The artist to succeed must always be single-minded. 'The world is too much with us,' — Wordsworth's warning, but our day needs it more, far more than his. Striving to widen our range of knowledge, we know nothing thoroughly, do nothing really well. That 's entirely wrong. The shoemaker must stick to his last, ignore what lies beyond it, and let politics, society, all the rest of the infernal business, go hang. Holding to one purpose with a grip of iron, he may add something to the world's beauty; that 's his work, and that 's enough, God knows! Losing his grip, he 'll be a cobbler all his life. The world, which has driven him this way and that, will give his work the cold shoulder and pass it by. Cobblers are plenty, shoemakers are few!"

"Hear, hear!" laughed Mr. Jarvis; "that 's sound philosophy."

"Common sense, Adam," rejoined Mr. Canterbury. "The human brain is a limited receptacle, incapable of holding the entire terrestrial globe at once, much less the celestial one, as some good Bostonians would force it to do."

Ives laughed in his turn. "But how if the tarantula is killed?" he asked, "not scotched? If he never wakes to bite again?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Canterbury; "that 's a different matter. Then call in another doctor. I 'm a specialist, and prescribe only for the ills I know. That reminds me; I left some medicine at home, half-mixed; I must go in and shake the bottle. Perhaps I 'll come back, perhaps not, — no matter; my dinner has agreed with me." He sprang up, moved to the door, and turned again with his hand on the latch. "One word more, Mr. Ives! Whatever you do, don't try to be Lord of the Spheres!"

When he had pattered away, the other two continued the talk for a few minutes, until it was interrupted by a sharp ring at the front door, and the maid, presently appearing, announced a messenger to see Mr. Jarvis.

"Good!" said he, getting up. "No! no! don't move, Mr. Ives. It's only Benson's man about a costume. I'll see him in the hall. Wait here! I'll be back in a moment, and so will the ladies."

Left thus to himself, Ives took a turn about the room inspecting prints and photographs. At a sound behind him he turned back to find that the kitchen door had opened and that Miss Ashley had come in.

"Oh!" she cried, instinctively recoiling.

He smiled, entirely master of himself now, pleased to have startled her, however slightly.

"You did not expect to find me here alone," he remarked.

"I came in for my work, — I left it on the sofa, — yes, here it is; and for Miss Colt's glasses, — they are here, too; but I am not sorry to find you alone. I have not thanked you for helping me out at the Orbitts', the other night, with that foolish game. It was very good of you."

"A little thing to do!"

"Ah, but the little things! They count, often; this accidental meeting of ours, for instance. Now that it has happened, we may meet again, I hope, without embarrassment."

"Oh, yes. These accidents must occur occasionally among acquaintances."

Her cheeks flushed at this, and, noting the change, he added: "The word is too strong, perhaps."

"No."

"So much the better. Let it be

'as acquaintances meet,
Smilingly, tranquil-eyed —'

to quote the clever poet."

"The point is this. You will come, sometimes, when Uncle John invites you, and not let our — acquaintance — stand in the way?"

"I must, of course, whenever that is possible."

"Thank you. Good-night!"

She turned away with a faint smile, as of satisfaction at gaining her point; and the smile nettled him.

"Good-night!" he responded; "but again there is no occasion for thanks."

"Oh, that was a mere formality," she retorted. "Pray consider it so. One must be civil, Mr. Ives, even among acquaintances."

So, emphasizing lightly the incivility of his own curt answers, she shot her Parthian arrow and retired in good order.

"The last word!" he muttered, as the door closed behind her; "they must always have it. Why should

I stay longer to offend and be offended? I won't! One skirmish a night is enough!"

Since some formal leave-taking of Miss Colt was essential, he rejoiced to hear a word from her in the hall where she had joined in the conference over the costume. With escape thus made easy, he opened the door to find the business ended, the messenger dismissed. His hostess in unfailing cordiality begged him to stay longer. When he demurred, she urged him to come again — often.

"Although," she added, "I can't promise you every time in the cast our leading lady."

"No matter!" he laughed; "the soubrette will do."

"Which one?" she asked. "Dorothy, you remember, undertakes both lines."

"Oh, I meant Sophia!" he answered; and, departing, left her wrinkled face aglow.

XIV

STALEMATE

"If you please, my dear Kelton, — though I fear it will disappoint you, — suppose we cut our game to-night," suggested John Ashley, as they passed into his library after dinner on that same Sunday evening. "The fact is that I have something on my mind, and I have decided — reluctantly — to ask your advice about it."

"I understand the reluctance," Kelton answered, with what certain of our poets would have described as a wan smile; "advice is a thing more blessed to give than to receive!" Then, settling himself in an armchair and turning his back resolutely upon the chess-table, he continued: "That 's not my own good thing, mind you; but I forget who said it."

In Dorothy's absence the two men had dined by themselves. Kelton had noticed during the meal his host's preoccupation in unwonted intervals of silence. As these happened to accord with his own mood, he was grateful for them; though suspicion of their cause began to stir in his mind, he was unprepared for the approaching act of confidence. Accepting that as a matter of course, however, he expressed no surprise, but calmly waited for his cue.

Coffee came and cigars were lighted. Mr. Ashley moved to the fireplace and stood before it, as if deriving comfort from an imaginary blaze. After another silence, painfully prolonged, he spoke, hesitated, and, shifting his position uneasily, spoke again upon what was evidently a side issue.

"I — that is to say — by the way, I want first to ask a favor of you. I am considering my will, — a new one. Will you consent to serve as one of my executors?"

Kelton's surprise now was manifest. "Why — to be sure — since you desire it; but —"

"Wait a bit! Let me forestall your objections, if you have any. I want to appoint three men. Stephen Middlecot will act, with one of my partners, — March, perhaps, — or perhaps another. They will look after the business end and decide any difficult questions that come up; but I should like, besides, a friend to represent me, and you are my choice. The actual work involved would be slight, you see."

"I comprehend; the work would not stand in the way. My doubt concerns only the wisdom of your choice. Assuming competence on my part, you are of a long-lived race, my junior, too, by a little. The chances are that you will survive me."

"Modest man! Ah, well, if that's all! The chances of life and death are not to be reckoned. The objection is overruled. Should I survive, you shall not be summoned from the shades; I'll appoint a successor. Meanwhile, I want your name. Thank you for giving it to me."

"The thanks should be mine; the honor, too, — one long deferred, I hope. If your mind holds through the ten, twenty, thirty years that intervene, I will serve, I won't say gladly."

"Good! And now that you have become my legal representative, I can speak more freely of the other matter. That concerns Dorothy."

"Ah?"

"Yes. As we go up life's long incline our horizon widens. '*Superasque evadere ad auras!*' In that upper air we escape, little by little, from the limited *aura* of ourselves. With our time half gone already, we begin to consider time to come, and the fixed centre of our happiness seems suddenly to shift its ground, until the happiness of those we are to leave behind actually becomes of more importance than our own. I speak in general terms, but you understand me, — it is myself I mean. Dorothy is my nearest relative, my residuary legatee. I want, above all things now, to see her happy."

"'Call no man happy till his death-day comes!'" quoted Kelton. "You ask a good deal, it seems to me."

"Don't talk nonsense! Limit yourself to earthly conditions, at best imperfect. I want to be reasonably certain, that 's all."

"I suppose I understand you. The long and short of it is, that, never having married yourself, you want to see her married."

"I do — to the right man."

"Old maids' children we know are perfect," said Kelton, gravely; "so are bachelors' wives; bachelors' husbands, too, no doubt!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I was merely wondering if you had gone so far as to choose for her — the right man."

John Ashley laughed. "Why, yes; the fact is that I have done just that."

"Ah! You have told her, of course, and she does n't agree in your choice. How strange!"

"Your brain works quickly and you jump at conclusions — like Horatio. It 's all in my mind's eye. I have some reason to think that he likes her; I wish I were as sure that she likes him; but I have n't told her, nor has any one else, so far as I know."

"Ah! Indeed?"

Without looking up, Kelton sank back in his armchair, smoking and ruminating. John Ashley leaned upon the mantelpiece, awaiting some further word, towering above him, accentuating thus the physical contrast between the two. Ashley, robust and florid, looked now of heroic size; while Kelton's thin wiry figure, shrunken into itself in his present attitude, seemed smaller than life; yet both were alert, vigorous, each in his own way, as an eagle and sparrow brought into close relationship might be.

"Well?" cried the eagle, after the prolonged pause, impatiently.

Kelton smiled. "Let me understand fully," said he. "There are so many young men about. Is your choice a decided preference, eliminating all other Richmonds from the field?"

"I don't say that; and yet, for the moment, I will say it; yes."

"And obeying entanglement's first law,— the law of juxtaposition,— you have brought them together?"

"There is no obstacle in the way of their meeting, — none whatever. They meet often enough, as I happen to know, and, as I hinted before, I believe Barkis to be 'willin'.' The trouble lies with her. Like most New England girls, she is fastidious, exacting. She has romantic ideas about male paragons, and waits to find one."

"Well, according to your showing, they are in the right path. Give them time! Let them continue to meet; he will, naturally, turn his best side toward her; she will find her paragon."

"Not unless she changes her mind, with a complete right-about-face, of which there is no sign."

The sparrow moved and twittered, with a queer note, half sigh, half chuckle.

"That 's true; they do change their minds, forward and back too, don't they?" he muttered.

"Yes, to be sure; but I can't see — "

"No more can I! I was thinking aloud, that 's all."

Mr. Ashley growled impatiently. "If you must think," said he, "let it be to some purpose. Here 's the point! What can I do to persuade Dorothy that her view of life — broad, as she considers it — is really a narrow one; that she might go farther and fare worse ; wait to all eternity without doing better ; in short, that here is the very man for her of all others ? "

" In other words, to make her view of life conform to yours," remarked Kelton, slyly.

" As her natural guardian, with head above the clouds and vision, on the whole, far-sighted, — yes."

" I perceive. The best thing you can do, in my belief, is to do nothing, — nothing whatever. Any move might well be for the worse. I think you are stalemated, John."

In spite of long acquaintance, slowly ripened to intimacy, Kelton was not in the habit of addressing his friend by his Christian name. He was conscious now of having done so for the first time, involuntarily ; but he let this pass without explanatory comment, and Mr. Ashley, absorbed in the substance of the speech, appeared to have noticed nothing unusual in its form.

" Is that the best you can do in the way of advice ? " he asked.

" An old bachelor's opinion ! " Kelton admitted. " Take it for what it 's worth, but I 'll be bound it 's the best that could be given. You can run the mind into a new groove by the power of reasoning, perhaps, but not the heart of us. That must run itself. They must run themselves. Wait ! Let things take their course. She may have some one in view who would suit even you as well as the other, — or, if she has changed her mind once, she may change it again."

Now, as it happened, the rumor of Dorothy's engagement, discussed, contradicted, and forgotten, had never reached, in its brief course, the ears of John Ashley. The fluttering gossip, though he might have been reckoned among the first to hear it, had passed him by, perhaps from his close relationship to both its victims. Such a possibility never having presented itself, he held to the fixed idea of understanding or misunderstanding still to come. Here was a new suggestion at which he caught sharply.

"Changed her mind once?" he asked. "Has she, Humphrey?"

"Humphrey!" He had noticed that small slip of the tongue, then, and wished to signify approval. Thus Kelton to himself, while he answered hastily: —

"I said 'if,' — only 'if'! *Varium et mutabile semper*. She 's a woman, isn't she?"

Mr. Ashley made no immediate reply, but flung himself down upon the sofa growling at his own erratic nature. He accepted the "if," of course. What could Humphrey Kelton know about this matter, that he did not know?

"Well, well!" he went on, finding articulate speech at last, "in one thing you 're quite wrong, — there 's no other who would suit me half so well; but in the main you 're right, I suppose. I must sit by without interference for a while longer. By the way, you don't ask who the man is."

"Why should I? I am not curious, and my knowledge of that detail would not affect my judgment. Let well — or ill — alone!"

"So be it, then. If I must, I must; though I itch to interfere notwithstanding. And that matter being settled for the moment, let 's have our game!"

Kelton pulled out his watch. "No, it grows late," said he. "I must get home."

His host understood him well enough to foresee that importunity would be vain, and he let him go with but a feeble protest; all the more readily from a conviction that his own restless mind was not at the moment to be riveted upon a chess-table. So, lighting another cigar, Kelton strode away into the night.

When he had gone, John Ashley discovered that his own cigar had been extinct for some time. He tossed it into the fireplace, as he paced the hearthrug up and down.

"Why did n't the man care to know?" he thought. "Perhaps because he suspected; that 's it, he suspected; he has sharp eyes, and his suspicion amounted to a certainty. 'Not curious' was what he said. Bosh! He knew!"

When Dorothy came in, she found her uncle seated under the reading-light, yawning over a novel.

"Why, I thought Mr. Kelton was with you!" she said, as, tossing away the book, he seemed to wake from it with a smile.

"No, he would not play to-night, but played me false, instead. He went home early. How did the dinner go?"

"Delightfully. Mr. Jarvis was at his best, and Miss Colt full of fun." Then poising herself lightly upon the arm of a chair Dorothy proceeded to take off her veil, and continued : “ She said to-night that she can’t grow old gracefully. She never will, I ’m sure, grow old.”

“ Who were the others ? ” pursued her uncle, idly.

“ Scarcely any one else. Mr. and Mrs. Canterbury, — oh ! and Mr. Ives ! ”

“ Ives ! ” repeated Mr. Ashley. “ Ives ! ”

There was a livelier note in his voice, but Dorothy, occupied now in carefully folding and pinning the veil, seemed not to notice it.

“ That reminds me,” Mr. Ashley went on ; “ Ives has n’t been here for a dog’s age. I ’ll bring him home to dinner. You won’t mind — eh ? ”

“ Oh, no ; I shan’t mind.”

“ He ’s such a good fellow ! ” Mr. Ashley paused, as if for her confirming word, but since none came, he added : “ I am very fond of Ives.”

“ Yes, of course.”

“ Why, what enthusiasm ! I thought you liked him fairly well.”

“ And so I do. I shall be glad to see him, — very glad, — if he cares to come.”

“ ‘ If he cares ’ ? He is not a recluse. He must care to see his friends occasionally. Why should n’t he ? ”

“ I don’t know. I only thought — we have had a pleasant acquaintance, but — no matter ! Good-night, Uncle John ! ” And, crossing to where he sat, she stooped, kissed him, and took his offered hand. “ Pray, bring Mr. Ives home to-morrow, if he can spare the time."

She would have slipped her hand away, but he detained her gently.

"He has spared it many times a week; half a dozen, at least, — and you call him an acquaintance. Is there anything wrong? You have n't quarreled, have you?"

"I quoted him. He said to-night we were acquaintances."

An illusory gleam of light shot into Mr. Ashley's clouded mind. "She cares for him, — he does n't ask her!" was his sudden thought. Cheered by that comfortable delusion, feeling that all now must speedily be settled, he replied buoyantly: —

"Well, well, I am thankful that there has been no falling-out. Do you know, I half feared you misunderstood him, were prejudiced against him on one ground or another; stupid of me, was n't it, considering my own regard for him? I have proved that, have n't I? He is the best of men in my opinion. I took the wrong view about you, and am glad to know it. We 'll soon set that right. I 'll bring him home to dinner. Good-night, and good repose! Why, what 's the matter?"

The matter was that Dorothy had turned at the door, and stood silent, with downcast, troubled face.

"Uncle, you don't know, — I ought to tell you. Mr. Ives and I were engaged to be married, but I have broken the engagement."

Mr. Ashley sprang up with a gasp of surprise, crossed the room and caught her as she turned to fly.

She yielded at once. While he held her for a moment, their eyes met and hers were full of tears; but she drove them back; then, resting her head upon his shoulder, she waited calmly for his next word.

"I did n't know. Thank you for telling me. Now, stay a moment longer, and tell me a little more, won't you? When did all this happen?"

She followed him to the sofa and seated herself there at his side.

"About a month ago, it was. He asked me,—I said 'Yes.' I meant that you should know at once,—that night,—but, somehow, could not speak. I doubted myself even then. When he came again, I had decided. We went to walk; I told him that my mind had changed."

"And did you tell him why?"

"Yes. It was simply that I liked him, but did not love him; feeling no more than that, I could not keep my promise."

"Was there no other reason?"

"No. I have been to blame, I know,—much to blame, but—"

"No, no; these mistakes must happen, I suppose. You did perfectly right, I 'm sure. Better late than never in such matters—no doubt, no doubt! Good Lord! How little we know of what is going on around us! We seem to look over the heads of things, don't we?"

The sadness of his tone controverted this labored and guarded attempt at consolation; but she heeded only the words, contriving to extract from them a grain of comfort.

"You don't think me hopelessly weak-minded, then, cruelly inconsiderate — impossible?"

"Certainly not. We won't call ourselves hard names. You are the one to settle a question like this, and you have settled it. I can't deny that I am sorry, yet —"

"I knew it would disappoint you."

"But that can't be helped. You must be happy in your own way, not mine. The past is past; let it go; to fret over it is morbid. You are going? Well, good-night! Get to bed — to sleep! And no more hard names!"

"Thank you, uncle. I will do my best. Good-night! You have been very kind, — more than that, — more than I can tell you!"

Her voice broke, and she hurried off without another word, as if fearing to give way altogether, leaving her uncle to his solitary promenade upon the hearthrug, which he resumed in much agitation of mind. Things were not going his way at all; he was both irritated and perplexed by the turn they had taken; the former almost as much from his own want of foresight regarding the issue of his pet scheme as from its present futility; while his perplexity arose from the fact that he could not possibly adjust himself to Dorothy's mental attitude, despite his heroic efforts at self-control and reassuring words of comfort. Why was she so moved, if she did not care for Staunton Ives? And if she did care for him, why, in Heaven's name, should n't she say so?

"Women are the devil!" he repeated over and over again, pacing, turning at the sixth step, retracing the six mechanically, like a sentinel; but this admission of masculine helplessness did not mend the matter. The scheme had not worked; there it was, and there it remained, — an awkward, gloomy failure. Viewing it from every side, his one cause for satisfaction lay in his own instinctive reticence when the disappointment was brought home to him. He had not "let out" at her, as he would have liked to do; had, providentially, withheld the reproaches at his tongue's end, accepting her incomprehensible position as if he understood it, soothing her, moreover, to the best of his ability. He had given her her head, so to speak, where even the slightest hint of opposition might have proved a serious mistake. Yes, that was the judicious course, and that course, probably, must be pursued indefinitely. Otherwise she might commit herself to statements which she would regret afterwards, perhaps, but which certainly would be hard to recall. He could only let her have her fling out; continue to acquiesce, to agree and lie low.

"It 's the devil!" he reasserted, as, finally, he put out the light and went slowly up to bed; "the devil and all! There is no use in trying to run their hearts. I can't move hand or foot to get my way. Humphrey Kelton is quite right. I 'm stalemated!"

XV

THE FIFTEENTH OF JUNE

The twelfth annual race-meeting of the Turf Club opened in weather conditions which the newspapers afterward recorded as perfect, — under a cloudless sky, with the noonday heat of early summer suddenly tempered by a refreshing easterly breeze. At two o'clock the country roads in the neighborhood of the course were crowded with vehicles of every kind tending all one way: to the club grounds, where, for the season's event, the public was admitted. The broad acres of meadow land and wooded park, though but a few miles from town, still kept at that time their sylvan character. The club establishment was merely an old farmhouse, somewhat enlarged, extended by low verandas. Even the racing facilities were pleasantly primitive. Opposite the judges and starter, a few benches on the shady side of a pine-clad hillock served as grand-stand; otherwise the spectators strolled about at will under the pine trees on the hilltop, which commanded a good view of the grounds, including the steeplechase course, with its hurdles and water-jumps, as well as the half-mile track for races "on the flat."

From this shaded height, as the crowd in gay apparel slowly assembled, it seemed as if a vast, floral pageant were unfolding itself upon the field. Flags fluttered in the breeze; the jockeys in their bright jackets darted to and fro. All conceivable hues mingled and passed and shone out again, woven into inextricable patterns against a background of living green, like the gradual development of some preconceived design; light, movement, color making of the chance effect, as Mrs. Middlecot declared, the "sportiest" sight imaginable.

She had driven out early with her husband, who was one of the judges; he had hurried away, after showing her the seat reserved for her on the second row of benches, but she lingered on the hillside with a group of friends who were enjoying a comprehensive view of the animated scene. Among them stood Jim Drake, an officer of the club, full of points, which he was eagerly imparting. Mrs. Middlecot listened with languid interest; she was not "horsy," as she often declared, and had come for the pleasure of the passing show rather than for results.

Suddenly, Mr. Drake broke off his harangue, and pulled out his watch. "Why don't they start?" he asked, impatiently; "we 're late!"

"I see the first race is for galloways," said Mrs. Middlecot, glancing at her card. "I wish I could remember what galloways are."

"Little fellows!" graciously explained the high authority; "fifteen hands and under! There they come now; better get to your places, ladies, for a good look at 'em, — amateur riders, all, you know. Here 's

Doyle's bay mare, 'Sapphira'; is n't she a beauty? She 's my favorite! And he starts another in this race, — the black, 'Marmorne,' with Johnson up. He 's a good looker, too!" Speaking, Mr. Drake vanished, while the little group scattered in all directions.

Mrs. Middlecot went calmly down to her aisle-seat in the second row. She was glad to find herself next to Tom Trent, who was young, agreeable, not absorbed in horse-flesh; there, like herself, more for the general joy than for any of its component parts. Just across the aisle sat Mrs. Doyle, wife to the fortunate owner of "Sapphira" and "Marmorne"; and she could be depended upon for points when it should be absolutely necessary to acquire them. In front of that faultless fashion-plate of a woman, whose clothes were always exciting, was John Ashley, who became at once aware of Mrs. Middlecot's presence, and acknowledged it with a pleasant salutation. Next beyond him she saw Mr. Kelton, who, of course, looked any way but hers. Not that there was any harm in this; — on the contrary. She straightened herself, to ignore him with becoming dignity. "Ah! I owe you one!" she thought; then laughed inwardly at the remembrance of her awkward intrusion upon his abode.

The starter's flag fell, and the galloways were off. All eyes strained after them. "Marmorne," with Johnson up, took the lead at once, and held it all the way. Shouts rose and fell, redoubling in force, as in an incredibly short time he was back again, the winner of cup and sweepstakes. The excitement, though short-lived over the half-mile stretch, had been intense; and to her surprise Mrs. Middlecot found herself stirred by it, heartily moved to congratulate Mrs. Doyle, actually exultant in Mr. Johnson's victory. She knew him slightly, to be sure; perhaps that fact might account for her new joy of the conflict; or had she already caught the racing fever? To the latter conclusion she inclined before the second race ended; and by the middle of the afternoon she was studying entries and choosing favorites, eager for all the information that Mrs. Doyle could supply.

The crowning glory of the day was to be the annual Turf Steeplechase, which Mrs. Middlecot now awaited with becoming fervor; but before that came the most important of the flat races, open to four-year-olds, over a mile course; and for this many horses were entered: "Ilex," "Silvertop," "Winnipeg," "Wonderstunt," "Pythagoras," "Trix," "Parishioner," "Bailiff," and the rest! She still thought their names foolish, yet keenly identified them, hoping that old "Silvertop" might win. There was much delay about the start which, finally made, proved to be what is called a ragged one. They were gone away at last, but "Silvertop" had dropped behind. Then, all at once, the distant clamor sharpened into a note of alarm which, instantly caught up, was echoed around the field. "Silvertop," at the far turn, had thrown his rider; and, wheeling about, came dashing wildly back along the course. The jockey sprang up and limped off, practically unharmed, while the horse, maddened by the uproar, drew on at frantic speed. The cry from the benches rose to a shriek of terror. There was a man upon the track, leisurely crossing to the starter's pavilion, unconscious that disaster threatened him. Confused by the outcries, he hesitated, saw his danger, plunged forward, — but too late. He was borne down by the frantic "Silvertop," who tore past in frenzy. In a flash, Mrs. Middlecot saw it all, and recognized John Ashley.

She was on her feet and at the rail in the place that he had occupied, as he was dragged away on the opposite side close under the pavilion, — just in time; for the racers clattered by, and were off again on their second round, leaving behind them at this point only consternation. Beyond, the race went on, in tumult; but, here, no one heeded it. All eyes were fixed upon the knot of men collected around that hidden, recumbent figure. The silent group scattered, formed again, moved forward out of sight into freer ground, behind the line of waiting vehicles. There was a rush up the hillside for a possible better view of what was going on; the benches were half deserted. Everywhere, in a confusion of tongues, the same question was asked, but none could answer it. Then came another whirlwind of the racers. "'Bailiff' wins!" At that exciting word anxiety over the issue of the accident lapsed and was half forgotten; but it revived a moment later, when a mounted officer appeared in charge of "Silvertop," now reduced to subjection. The feverish inquiries began again, still unanswered. Mrs.

Middlecot, almost alone at the rail now, could learn nothing. Her husband was nowhere in sight, as husbands never were. Suddenly, Tom Trent turned up, crossing the track breathlessly. " He 's not badly hurt, — I came to tell you, — just a bit shaken up; we are taking him home now!" And Mr. Trent made off, the way he came.

She drew a long breath, and cried " Thank Heaven!" to whom it might concern; but she wanted no more racing. She would walk over to the clubhouse, sit down in some quiet corner to rest, take tea and refreshment. Accordingly, she turned to go; and saw on the ground at her feet a small leather pocket-book, dropped there in the confusion. She picked this up, finding it to be merely a card-case, — a man's. Whose? None other than Mr. Kelton's! — for the cards were his; one of the two pockets was filled with them. She smiled at the discovery; then looked into the other pocket and smiled again; for this contained only a woman's photograph, easily recognizable as Dorothy Ashley's. A trifling circumstance, yet it gave Mrs. Middlecot's thoughts a new turn. Her fingers closed over the trifle. She would not have parted with that, just then, for all the world!

Hastily hiding away the case and its contents, she walked on across the race-course, taking the shortest way to the clubhouse veranda. One corner of this, extended into an open terrace, was a favorite rendezvous for spectators, who thronged there now, impatient for the steeplechase; and, as Mrs. Middlecot came up the steps, about her gathered a little swarm of friends, asking information in a dozen questions at once. There had been a catastrophe, as they had perceived at long range. What had happened? Who was the victim? How serious were the injuries? She had but half quieted them with Tom Trent's reassuring word, when shouts from the track warned the company that the event of the day — the Turf Steeplechase — had begun. The starters were off, down the field, over the bars, with colors flashing far away, across country. There was no time to waste on any thought but this. The group of questioning sympathizers scattered at once, to regain lost places. Mrs. Middlecot alone, still mindful of her glimpse of John Ashley under the horse's hoofs, each recollection of which brought with it a recurring shudder, decided to forego the sport. She had now no difficulty in finding a quiet corner, and, unperceived, withdrew to it.

Her cup of tea had proved soothing to the nerves, yet though after it she could recall the accident without quivering, she preferred not to join the crowd again. The last race, too, must be over. It was time to think of driving home. She stepped out upon a back veranda, where there was no one to disturb her, and in the distance saw her husband making off toward the paddock with what seemed an official group. He was not ready, then. She had another half-hour, perhaps, to wait for him; and what a lovely afternoon it was!

A narrow path led away from this quiet side of the house, far beyond the stables into the woods. Mrs. Middlecot, glad to be in the open air and undisturbed, decided to explore it; and in a few moments she left all the restless life of the clubhouse behind her, out of sight and hearing. There was thick shade overhead; the leaves flickered, the sunlight slanted down; the footway, not too clearly defined, led on through tangled undergrowth. It might have been the heart of a wilderness, miles from anywhere. Under the spell of its brooding silence she strolled along, stopping now and then to watch the scurry of a chipmunk, or listen to some unfamiliar bird-note. The sudden solitude of the woodland place delighted her; she had forgotten that such things could be, ten steps out of town.

She came to a stone wall, broken down and overgrown, with the trickle of a shallow brook on the farther side. Crossing both, she followed the path that wound over a hillock and plunged again abruptly to the lower level. From the height, she overlooked it to a distant clearing, where another path crossed hers at a right angle. There, taking her first step down, she changed her mind, stepped aside into the underbrush and stood still, startled by the sound of voices, instinctively determined to avoid intrusion. This was her solitude by right of conquest. She resented interference with it.

So, hidden among the birches, Mrs. Middlecot, at long range, watched two figures — a man and a woman — enter the clearing by the intersecting path and pass across it out of sight. The two were deep in earnest talk of which she distinguished nothing coherent, yet they were near enough for recognition. She knew them instantly, of course; since they were Alice Orbitt and Staunton Ives.

As Mrs. Middlecot was wont to declare, her strong interest was always, first and foremost, in humankind. She carried this, indeed, even farther than she, herself, would have admitted, in a readiness to study her neighbors; to impute motives and invent possible situations depending upon them; to watch the flight of straws and wonder whither they were tending. She emerged from shelter now, smiling at her chance discovery, for two reasons. First, because it appeared as if the tables had nearly toppled over, to make her an unwelcome intruder upon the seclusion of others; second, because she remembered that the latest word addressed by her to one of these two had been a reference to the other, in that playful caution given Mr. Ives about taking thought before following the Orbitt way. He had taken no thought at all, or he had taken much, since he must have followed that same way far this very afternoon. The two had not been at the races, of that she was sure. They were dressed for rough walking, probably were in the midst of a long tramp through woods and over pastures. Here was a very pretty straw indeed, almost a portent. She wondered what it meant, inclined to think it must mean something.

If so, it would be amusing to determine the course of events with keen, prophetic vision. How were the Orbitts likely to feel about this? — what likely to say and do? Would Mrs. Orbitt find the circumstances wholly rational? Would Caspar accept and approve such a son-in-law without a murmur? Somehow, she failed to see Staunton Ives adopted into that quaintly archaic clan, pursuing panting Culture, without pause, from one remote fastness to another; but then Alice was the least rigid of the lot, revolutionary, indeed, in many of her tendencies. At all events, putting two and one together, as it were, the bit of gossip so lately current about Ives and Miss Ashley could have no foundation.

Reminded thus of the piece of lost property in her possession, she pulled out Kelton's card-case and examined it again. So he carried Dorothy's photograph about with him! Did he, indeed? What was the meaning of that? Had her own crusty old devotee, who had shown her the door with mocking affability, lost his heart a second time to the new idol of the passing season? It might be; but was this wild hope, supposing him to have conceived it, in the least likely to be realized? She doubted that; yet stranger things than that had happened, too. Lo, here at hand lay another amusing possibility to consider and work out in the light of knowledge providentially acquired!

Smiling and considering as she went, Mrs. Middlecot walked down the path toward the clearing in such preoccupation of mind that the charms of the retired spot were nothing to her. Concerned with humanity and its development, she forgot the sunshine and the bird-songs. Only where the paths diverged, upon perceiving that there was no one in sight, did she recover consciousness of natural beauties, and laugh at herself for forgetting her intent to enjoy them. It was always so with her, she reflected. Character proved far more piquant than setting; and any character would do, if no better one should present itself. She supposed that if she had been granted children of her own to watch and study, she might have taken less interest in the children of others. The destinies of the Orbitt household were not her business, thank Heaven! She dismissed Alice with the hope of a pleasant walk, and for the rest of her spare time would attend strictly to her own, turning it another way. As for the second affair, that also was but an idle fancy, — sheer nonsense!

Prolonging her solitary stroll agreeably, she did not revert to either of these idle fancies above half a dozen times in the course of it; and she reappeared, refreshed, in the whirl of things, to find her husband, with his horse at the door, just beginning to inquire where she was.

"Well, Stephen, who won the steeplechase?" she asked, when they had driven off.

"What, don't you know? 'Old Grimes,' with the owner, Haskett, riding. He jumped beautifully; it was an all-round slasher. I never saw the old fellow do so well. Where on earth were you?"

"I took a walk in the woods, and must have gone miles, — how lovely they are! I could n't think, there, of anything but Mr. Ashley's accident, and wanted to get away."

"Yes, yes; a close shave that was! But they tell me he's all right. We'll stop at the door, and ask about him, on the way in."

As they came slowly up over the hills in the sunset hour, enjoying a distant view of the city with its western windows glittering in the golden light, two figures passed from the woods on one side to those of the other, crossing the road diagonally, a few paces in front.

"Those are good Bostonians," laughed Mr. Middlecot; "never a right angle if they can help it! Hullo! Weren't they Ives and Alice Orbitt? Anything up there, Rose?"

"Not that I know of. They don't confide in me."

"Well, well, why shouldn't they walk home from the races together, if they want to? — they, or any other two? I don't spread the news, bless their hearts! If they ask me, I haven't seen 'em. Pretty well matched, though, don't you think?"

"Perfectly!" his wife agreed. "I can see them, side by side, attending lectures forever after, — but in dim futurity. Give them a few years more."

"I'll give 'em nine, — according to the advice of Horace for a perfect poem, — remembering of what kind they come, — the dear, censorious, rational Boston things! What possessed you ever to take one of us, Rose?"

"You crossed my path at a right angle, and I knew you weren't a good one!" was her laughing answer.

Later, they drew up at Mr. Ashley's door, and learned from Murray that his master, though badly shaken up and somewhat bruised, with one rib broken, was suffering comparatively little pain.

"He's pretty comfortable now, sir, thank you; I think we'll have him with us a long while yet. Yes, mum, Miss Dorothy was here when they first brought him in, and she bore up wonderful,—as you might say, quite beautiful to see, mum! I'll give her your message and him, too, thank you, mum!"

XVI

COUNSEL THAT DARKENETH

Although Mr. Ashley's case gave no substantial ground for alarm under careful treatment, precaution was deemed indispensable in dealing with it. The doctors took pains to make him understand this need in view of the shock to his system, prescribing absolute rest, intimating, moreover, that it must be long continued. For the first few days he lay still, with no apparent interest in the outer world, patiently suffering intermittent pain, seeing no one but the regular attendants, his nurses, except, occasionally, Dorothy and the faithful Murray, who became, as a matter of course, supplemental caretakers. As his condition improved, he was permitted to sit up for a part of the day, to read a newspaper, to receive certain intimate visitors, — Stephen Middlecot, Humphrey Kelton, his partners; and with these latter, restrained only by a time-limit, even to discuss business affairs upon which he entered eagerly. If he did not pursue them always with his wonted heartiness, that he was convalescent all agreed.

The first time that Staunton Ives was admitted, upon being asked to wait for a moment in the drawing-room, he found Miss Ashley there. She looked somewhat pale and tired, but was glad to see him, of course;

properly cordial, provokingly self-possessed, calm, cool, reserved; so that she could hardly have failed to perceive a recurrence of that awkward shyness in him of which he was conscious at their latest meeting in Gibbon Place. If she did perceive this, she might have attributed it to the place of their present meeting, which, once familiar to him, he had not seen since they parted there on very different terms. Their talk now was confined to considerations of the moment, — inquiries and answers relating to the patient, — in the progress of which, recovering himself, he conformed to her conventional manner; and he made his leave-taking icily formal when the summons to the sick-room came, as one who would show plainly that their changed relations no longer disturbed him. She must have understood that.

When he called again, they did not meet; and, going away, he glanced into the empty room as he passed its door, only to reflect that it was better so. What could be gained now by any interview with her, conventional or otherwise?

Mr. Kelton, who was constant in his visits, often stayed on for a while in the drawing-room upon discovering Miss Ashley there. He seemed, as Dorothy thought, to grow less bitter than of old in striving to make himself companionable. He was gravely solicitous, suggestive and helpful in small ways, eager for more than he could find to do. The new demand upon his latent sympathies certainly agreed with him. She had called him once the bear that had become bearable. Now, she rejoiced at his gradual process of transformation into a human being who proved also to be a devoted friend. Had her uncle really made him over, or was the change superficial, merely one of the moment? She could account for it only by a curious susceptibility to Uncle John's influence, which, in either case, must be said to have worked a marvel.

One afternoon, Kelton came down after a shorter call than usual. "John looks tired," he asserted; "and there is some fever, too. I thought it best not to stay longer. The doctor ought to see him."

A message was sent to the doctor accordingly; and, when the visitor had gone, Dorothy went up to find her uncle in his armchair, restlessly tossing aside the light rug which had been placed over his knees.

"I'm all right!" he declared; "as right as can be! — but it's infernally hot in this room."

His face was flushed and his hands were hot, though the day was cool for the season, and the windows were open. Dorothy and the nurse together did their best to persuade him that he had sat up a little too long, but he scoffed at the idea, insisting that he was entirely well; he would not even lie down to please them.

Upon the doctor's coming, however, he was promptly put to bed, and, once there, was content to stay on indefinitely without farther protest.

"It appears that I am going to have a little fever," he admitted to Dorothy the next time she came in.

She was assured that the slight relapse was not alarming, provided he were kept perfectly quiet, free from all exciting influences.

For days thereafter, he lay in bed, weak, disinclined to talk, placid and uncomplaining, but pathetically indifferent to what went on around him. Dorothy, at times, relieved the nurses, bringing work or a book and sitting within call; yet he rarely spoke, indeed hardly noticed her; fortunately, he often dropped asleep, and that, of course, was best.

One night, while she sat there alone, he stirred in his sleep and said a few words. She moved her chair nearer to the bedside, to discover what he wanted. The words were incoherent at first. He opened his eyes, but did not recognize her. He seemed to be dreaming of chess; she caught faintly the familiar terms. Then his speech grew clearer.

"Check! Stalemate! That 's it, Humphrey," he whispered; "she is all wrong, and we must set her right. She does n't know her own mind."

Dorothy started, feeling instinctively that the name, thus evaded in the unconscious expression of his thought, would, if spoken, be hers. A moment later, there could be no longer any doubt of it.

"Do you hear, Humphrey?" he went on in a low voice, distinct, yet constrained. "I want her to marry Staunton Ives. Tell her I have set my heart upon it. He is the man of all others to make her happy. She will find that out, some day, — don't let it be too late!"

She sprang up with an impulse to fly from the room. Then, as he spoke again, she stopped, waited, and listened. His eyes, fixed upon her, still, apparently, were sightless.

"Juxtaposition!" he muttered; "fudge! it does n't work. I want her to know! They say this is nothing, that I shall get up, — but if I don't, — you 'll tell her I had it in my heart! You won't forget, Humphrey? It might make a difference then, you see. We must not be stalemated."

His eyes closed; he turned his head aside; his mutterings grew faint, trailing off into confused sounds which died away. Dorothy returned to her place, and sat for some time with clasped hands lost in thought. Then the nurse, coming in, inquired if he had slept all this while.

"No," she answered. "He was awake, just now, wandering in his mind a little."

"Ah, yes," the nurse replied, as though the occurrence were not infrequent; "playing his game, I suppose."

Dorothy longed to ask the woman for a precise report of his wanderings, but prudently refrained from doing so, lest undue weight should be attached to rambling words which, otherwise, might pass unnoticed. She said no more, and left the room.

A fruitful source of self-communing had now arisen which perplexed her incessantly for many days and nights. The discovery that her uncle, notwithstanding his apparent acceptance of her decision in the matter of the broken engagement, really desired its reversal, was a most distressing one. How could he ask her to take the step which she had determined to be unjustifiable, — to marry a man whom she did not love, thereby making her whole life unhappy, merely to gratify his own whim? He did not ask it; yet here it was, proved to be the desire of his heart, if he were to die to-morrow, laying its burden upon her, like some distasteful, oppressive inheritance. She would not, could not do it! Her life and her love were those in question; her judgment, surely, was alone to be considered.

If, however, Uncle John were really very ill? If he were at death's door? The suggestion brought moments when she felt that to yield would become a kind of pious duty which, after his death, unquestionably must be performed. At such times she assumed, of course, that a word from her would suffice to renew the tender relation from which abruptly she had recoiled. Ives, at parting, had assured her that he should stand by in the dark indefinitely, waiting for her sign. Whenever, then, by some mysterious force his constancy should awaken a response in her, she must, for her own sake as well as his, light up her tower of silence with signal-fires. If, meanwhile, her devoted lover, undergoing a change of heart, should prove indifferent to the warning for which he professed to wait, she must bear that humiliation as best she might. Herein lay a disagreeable possibility not to be avoided.

There were other moments when the situation revealed by her uncle's unconscious speech irritated her beyond measure. His irresponsible faculties unmistakably had continued an actual discussion of her affairs with Humphrey Kelton. She could not know that this took place before she confided in her uncle, therefore with no breach of confidence on his part. Not unnaturally, perhaps, she jumped to the contrary conclusion, and blamed him for disclosing her secret to a third person, to one of the last, indeed, whom she would have chosen to learn it. The human being never lived, surely, who did not instinctively resent discussion of his own personal matters in which he, himself, could take no share. In this case the matter was of so intimate a nature as to drive the subject of it to unreason whenever thought of the unauthorized conference came to mind.

In Dorothy's mood of irritation she condemned both transgressors equally, — her uncle for talking, and his friend for listening to the talk which, as she argued, he had no right to hear. She might, in time, forgive one for telling, — the other for knowing, never; and incessant annoyance at what she deemed an intolerable position worked further mischief to its first cause, — the innocent and injured victim, Ives, against whom indignantly, ere long, she steeled her heart. All the conditions were preposterous, outrageous. She could never reconcile them; never love him, never accept him now, whatever happened.

It was this rebellious mood which finally prevailed. Were her uncle to die to-morrow, she decided that it would make no difference; his dying wish must go unfulfilled. Let him ask anything else, no matter what the sacrifice involved; she would accept it cheerfully; but it was beyond her power to grant the thing that he most desired.

There were no more pleasant talks now with Mr. Kelton in the drawing-room. When he called to ask about the patient, she took care to be out of the way; if he asked for her, she would not see him. Once, meeting her in the street, he stopped to make inquiries, but struck, perhaps, by her constraint of manner, he cut them very short and went his way. She reproached herself afterward for lack of cordiality; but how could she be cordial? He knew so much more than he had a right to know.

That most amiable and sympathetic of philosophers, *tour à tour profond et frivole*, the late Michel de Montaigne, declared that there is a speaking silence in the slightest of our gestures,—that the hands, shoulders, nay, even the eyelids, may all be eloquent "in a language very easy and without any teaching to be understood"; especially, one might add, when life's experience has made the observant interlocutor, like Montaigne himself, apt to read that language. Mr. Kelton, who was a humble student of the genial skeptic, knew this passage well; and, a day or two later, he received abruptly an exemplification of its truth that stirred him more than he would have liked to say.

He had called for the latest word of John Ashley, whose state was so much improved that the nurse admitted the visitor for a few moments to the sick-room. As he was leaving the house afterward, Dorothy came in. They met upon the threshold; and she, repenting her recent discourteous treatment of him, strove to make amends.

"You have been upstairs," she said, as they shook hands; "I am very glad; and you found him better, didn't you?"

"Yes," said he, "much better!" Then, obeying an unlucky impulse, he added, "and quite clear in his mind."

All her stifled resentment rose again at this reference to former conditions, — a reference bitterly significant to her, if not to him. Her whole expression changed. She recoiled as from a blow; then brushed hastily by him, and passed on up the staircase, without a word of explanation, leaving him standing there alone.

He sighed, shook his head, went gravely down the steps, looked back and sighed again. So, deep in thought, with the same grave face, sombrely, morosely, he walked up the street, outwardly calm but writhing inwardly, to work out this latest of his problems alone, in silence, as he had worked out many a former one.

Dorothy, meanwhile, rushing to her room, dashed about it angrily with many muttered exclamations. "Of course! of course!" she cried, as she tossed aside her hat and veil and stamped her foot; "of course! He is ready to advise me, — to dictate, perhaps, at Uncle John's dictation; but I would not listen, and I will not! They could not force me into it, even if Uncle John should die to-morrow!"

Happily, the durability of this dread resolve was never tested. Mr. Ashley, continuing to improve, regained strength rapidly day by day. In a week all had gone so well that he was driven out for the first time. The fiercest heat of summer then descended suddenly upon the town; and the doctors decreed that he must move out of it to some secluded place in the country for change of air and scene, which now, more than all else, his case demanded. The old house at Campfield naturally suggested itself. He withdrew in Dorothy's charge, accordingly, to that quiet refuge, where soon he was on the highroad to recovery.

XVII

THE SHRINE REGLORIFIED

The poet Cowper's utterance that —

> "God made the country, and man made the town"

was not and had never been part of Humphrey Kelton's creed. Town-born and town-bred, he delighted in calling himself a cockney; though, had fortune created him in truth native to the City of London, his fellow native might well have found him a cockney with a difference; since he would, unhesitatingly, have preferred club-land and "the sweet shady side of Pall Mall" to the brick and mortar of less favored regions. Brick and mortar, however, were essential in the construction of his paradise; and he cherished unfailing regard for the witty Boston woman of his age and generation who begged a friend, bound for the country, to "kick a tree for her" upon arrival there. Many a time and oft, in his favorite leathern armchair at the club, on a summer night, when he had the whole place to himself, did he chuckle over that caustic demand which expressed a volume in the fewest possible words, — adding, as a footnote, that the club was the coolest and most comfortable spot in the world. Contentment with his own condition, or at least a semblance thereof, was one of the virtues upon which he prided himself.

As a matter of convenience rather than of preference, Staunton Ives also passed the summer in town; it was thus almost inevitable that he and his unconventional neighbor should meet oftener and for more extended communication than in the busier season of social entanglements. In fact, just now, their meetings were of frequent occurrence. They dined together, on an average, three times a week at the club, or elsewhere; smoked together on the club-balcony, or in Kelton's rooms; sometimes, even made afternoon excursions in a harbor-boat to one of the beaches, for a swim and a fish-dinner afterward; though these fresh-air and salt-water experiences were never wholly to Kelton's liking. "What could be more uncomfortable than a boat?" he asked. "Why button and unbutton oftener than was absolutely necessary? If town-fish were no better than shore-fish, were they not, at least, as good, and better served?" His outings were concessions, after a growling preamble; yet it always pleased him to growl, — indeed, in doing so, he obeyed an instinct, — and, occasionally, too, it pleased him to concede.

Encountering Kelton downtown, one warm afternoon, Ives suggested that there could be no better time for a trip to the shore. The other demurred, of course, but the wharf was very near; the next boat would leave in ten minutes; and, looking back over the long stretch of sunny street, he decided, with less resistance than usual, that it was easier to go aboard than not. They went, accordingly; but, once established on deck, Ives found him more than usually self-absorbed and uncommunicative. An oppressive silence settled down upon them. Ives, after trying in vain to pierce the gloom, bought a newspaper and diverted himself with it. The scheme of indifference worked to perfection. Left to himself, Kelton grew tired of himself. The sky was clear; the waves danced merrily; halfway down the harbor they ran into an easterly breeze; and, under these refreshing influences, the hermit-crab came out of his shell into one of his more pliable states, not especially enlivening, but existent, at least, which moved Ives to toss his paper overboard. On the whole, they were doing very well. The afternoon was passing, and the night would come, when Kelton, who might be called a night-bird, usually cropped out at his best.

Upon landing, they brushed through the crowd and made their way along the beach to their favorite resort, a bathing-establishment remote and, at this hour, unfrequented, where they had a wide stretch of sea almost to themselves. Kelton, who was a good swimmer, following his own bent in the water as on the land, presently made a bee-line for the open. Before long, his head became only a dark point in the distance; so that one of the chance timid loungers in the surf remarked to the caretaker, who hovered along the bath-house railing, that the reckless chap there, too far out, all alone, made him nervous. Ives, in Kelton's wake, at first, had turned back, halfway; now, swimming nearer, he overheard the anxious speaker, and reassured him; while the weather-beaten guardian of the place, familiar with his old customer's intrepid methods, quietly added: —

"There ain't no need to worry yet, I guess; he'll keep his head above water, through thick and thin, all right. I've seen him before."

While they watched, the point reversed its course, defined itself as a head, drew shoreward; and when he touched bottom, Kelton rose to his feet, dripping, slink, ruddy-hued, like an attenuated Triton.

"That was elemental!" he declared; "a dash at the real thing puts force into a man; nothing else matters after it, — except dinner, — and we have n't reserved a table."

"No," said Ives. "If you're well salted, let us go ashore and secure our corner window before the gulls get at it."

As Kelton agreed, having what he called a consummate appetite, they were able to order dinner in advance of the crowd, happily finding vacant the very table they would have chosen, set for two in an open window of the principal restaurant. They sat well above the heads of the murmuring swarm upon the sand, overlooking the long, slow wave that seemed to labor heavily, as if it had come unbroken all the way from Spain.

They had hardly finished their chowder to music of a lively strain, when the rush for places began. Very soon none were left, except those at a small table like their own, a few yards off, where the turned-up chairs denoted that another two had been wiser even than they themselves.

"What a ravenous flock it is!" said Kelton, surveying serenely the eager groups as they settled down. These were mixed groups, large and small, compounded of both sexes and all ages, the gayly and the simply dressed in wide variety of summer costume, forming together an incoherent assemblage.

"And not a familiar face among them," Ives rejoined. "Yes, by Jove, though, there are two!" and he indicated the reserved table, which now was occupied. "Miss Orbitt and her father, — they have just come in!"

Kelton, looking up, caught the eye of Caspar Orbitt, who nodded and smiled with a whispered word to his daughter. She immediately turned, and the four exchanged mute salutations. At that distance intercourse was impossible; but toward the end of the meal, one of the waiters approached Kelton with a verbal invitation: "The gentleman over there would like you gentlemen to take coffee with him, sir."

Kelton's first impulse expressed itself in a muffled sigh; but Ives was already on his feet, and, as a refusal would have been most ungracious, he sprang up too. In a moment they transferred themselves to the Orbitt table, where room and chairs awaited them.

"Good luck to find you!" said Mr. Orbitt, heartily. "You single men come here often, I suppose; we don't; this is a lark for us. Mrs. Orbitt has gone for exhilaration to Philadelphia, — when the cat's away, you know, — so we drove over from our summer quarters on the Point. Alice says it's only a short two miles, but I call it more. What do you think about it, Kelton? It used to be a stamping-ground of yours. We're just beyond the old Douglas place, on the Shore Road."

Kelton thought it depended upon which way you came; there were at least three approaches if you took the second right-hand turn by the Bassett barn. Mr. Orbitt and he were soon deep in discussion about that, while Ives talked with Miss Orbitt on less important matters. She found the crowd queerly interesting, and asked if there were actors about, or any other recognizable celebrities. Ives had recognized none, as he stated; then from his new point of view, he presently discovered and drew her attention to Barnicoat Bradish, manager of the Temple Theatre. Dining at the same table were a man and a woman. The face of the former Ives recalled, but could not identify, at first. An instant later, he remembered the name. It was Mr. Richard Ballister, otherwise Chilworth, the distinguished newspaper correspondent, whom he had met once, long ago, in Gibbon Place. The woman, short, slight, and dark, had very sharp, restless eyes. She was of ripe age, richly and becomingly dressed in an extreme of the fashion. Ives knew that he had seen her before, but knew no more. In a moment, however, her identity also was established by Kelton to whom Miss Orbitt appealed.

"Oh, yes," he answered; "that's Miss Gill. She writes for the press. You may call her, if you like, one of its powers. She 's very strong in description, — probably describing some of us at this minute, if we 're sufficiently important. Chilworth and Barney Bradish, too, with Nora Gill; the great ones of the city, in congress assembled."

Alice Orbitt was duly impressed by this aggregation of authority, especially also by Miss Gill's apparel, which she studied with care. Then, while Kelton and her father drifted into talk of political affairs, she engaged with Ives in the study of other groups, speculating lightly upon their character and possible achievements, diverted by her opportunity to consider a corner of the leisure world, where chance had brought together oddly contrasted figures.

A whistle blew its signal of departure from the steamer landing. Ives stirred uneasily.

" I hate to think of going," he said; " but the last boat is always overcrowded, and we must get back to town."

Kelton, however, with his spirit of opposition which could always be counted upon, was in no hurry.

" There are two later boats before the last," said he. " We need not move on yet."

" And we have plenty of time for our drive," added Caspar Orbitt. " I should like to stretch my legs a little. What do you say to a stroll upon the beach? "

The others agreeing, all four passed out to join the animated crowd below. In the dusk, the lights high overhead flashed up one after another, illuminating the stretch of sand before the restaurant. The band played lustily; there were still a few bathers in the surf, and on shore passed and repassed a multitude of promenaders, flowing back and forth in two streams along the lighted area within hearing of the music.

Mr. Orbitt and Kelton, deep in argument, walked on briskly with the outer stream, distancing their companions who followed at a slower pace. The throng here showed even more diversity than that indoors, and Miss Orbitt continued to inspect with interest all its varied features. Still, none were familiar, until she perceived that Mr. Bradish and his friends drew near.

"Here come Mr. Kelton's great ones of the city," she whispered, laughing.

The two men bowed politely to Ives, while the alert eyes of Miss Nora Gill turned upon him and Miss Orbitt a keen, comprehensive glance.

"She is an observer," laughed Ives, when they had passed. "I wonder what she writes about. Nothing escapes her, I 'll be sworn."

"Perhaps not," Alice Orbitt returned; "though I think it was, probably, only my hat at which she looked so hard. Watch her, when we pass again."

This, however, he was unable to do, though they made several turns of the lighted promenade; after which it became clear that the three magnates must have gone away before them. As they reached that conclusion, Kelton and Mr. Orbitt, who had strayed off, suddenly reappeared. Upon Kelton's statement that he was homeward bound with just time enough to catch an intermediate boat, their party broke up hurriedly; the Orbitts disappearing in the direction of the stable, while the returning townsmen made their way down the long pier to the steamer.

As there was ample room for all on board, they had no difficulty in finding a quiet place on the forward deck, where they could smoke and take what ease there was, as Kelton said. His amiable after-dinner mood had come on, making him cheerful and communicative, to the point of volunteering the opinion that they had killed time not unpleasantly and that Miss Orbitt was a nice girl; though how it happened, with so disputatious a father and a mother so exotically cultured, he could n't see. "There 's a feminine mind over-developed," he declared; "forced early, in a hothouse, I should say; and old Caspar will contradict anything; I suppose she irritates him."

Ives laughed and agreed, or sagaciously said nothing, letting him run on; this he did so fast, that they were at the wharf before they knew it.

The east wind had refreshed the town; and, as they walked up a narrow, deserted street at the back of the hill, Ives asked Kelton if he were going to the club.

"No," said he; "it's a cool night, — home is nearer, too; let us sit awhile in my room and have a talk!" — as though there had been no talking hitherto; but nothing better was suggested. A few minutes later, therefore, they stopped at Kelton's door; Ives waiting just inside it, while his host went forward to strike a light.

The room was dark as a pocket. Its blinds, closed to keep out the afternoon sunshine, had not been opened, and the gas-jet in the hall threw but a faint gleam across the threshold. Taking out his match-box, Kelton moved toward the nearest burner of the central chandelier, on his way stumbling over a chair that was displaced and cursing vaguely, on that account, the carelessness of whom it might concern. The match snapped, the burner streamed up to its fullest extent and made for a quarter of a minute a glare in the room; then Kelton, turning the light down, turned it out; yet not before Ives, staring straight before him at the cabinet, saw there the old silver frame, put back into its place as the setting for a new photograph, not of Mrs. Middlecot, — but to his intense surprise, of Dorothy Ashley. He knew the likeness well, had longed to possess it, thus recognized it instantly. The sudden glimpse of her face on Kelton's shelf gave him an unpleasant shock, — the more unpleasant, as his wonder grew. "Why should he have that there?" he thought; "and yet, why should n't he?"

Kelton, meanwhile, stood still, addressing himself in the dark. "Stupid!" he muttered; "my last match, too!"

Ives felt in his pocket, found matches, and held them out.

"Here you are!" said he; but Kelton had already groped his way toward the cabinet for other matches. Ives heard him fumble along the shelf, knocking some object down in the process. Then he came back, struck fire and lighted his chandelier at all three burners.

Ives, off his guard, instinctively glanced toward what he had seen. It was the frame that had fallen, and the likeness of Miss Ashley lay upon its face.

The glance betrayed him, giving another watchful pair of eyes the information they sought. Kelton knew at once that the photograph had been seen and recognized. Going over to the cabinet for something to smoke, he nonchalantly righted the frame.

"Sit down!" he said. "Have a cigar?"

Ives, after a moment's delay, took one, deciding to stay and smoke. "Thanks!" he said, settling into a chair; "though it can't be for long. I must go on, and—" In the act of lighting up, he stopped midway in his sentence and left it unfinished.

Kelton, leaning against the cabinet to fill a pipe, eyed him coolly. Then, deliberately, he drew attention to the frame by straightening it. "You saw that, did n't you?" he asked. "A good one, is n't it?"

"Yes — capital," said Ives, carelessly approving.

"I thought it so good," continued Kelton, "that I got Ashley to give it to me; but I did n't leave it there, or even put it in the frame. Some one has found the two things, and thought they went together; they don't, though, and never did. The servants' work, I suppose,—they barked my shin with that cursed chair, just now. I have been out all day, you see; 'when the cat's away—' to quote old Caspar's original proverb — " As he spoke, he took up the frame and began to draw out the photograph.

" It was n't half a bad idea," suggested Ives. " You had better leave it where it is."

" No," Kelton returned ; " I don't care for the combination." He drew the two apart, setting the frame down empty. " So much for that! and this," he added, holding up the likeness of Miss Ashley, " is capital, as you say. Since you think so, you may have it, if you like."

" Thank you very much," said Ives, with a smile; " but I won't take yours. I will wait, if you please, until Miss Ashley gives me one, herself."

" Ah, well," Kelton replied, tossing the photograph down into the confusion of his writing-table. " You won't have to wait very long for that, if I know anything."

The most secretive of mankind may break through his natural reserve to his own surprise, if thrust into a fitting condition of time, place, or companionship, — and Ives, though slow at confidence, was not inflexible ; on the contrary, he had been moved more than once to confide in Kelton, whose dryness, half assumed as he fancied it, both attracted and repelled him. Something had restrained him at the last moment, heretofore ; but now a sympathetic note in Kelton's voice struck home. The favoring moment coincided with his impulse and the last barrier went down.

He looked at Miss Ashley's capital likeness, casually cast amid a heap of papers, shifted in his chair, and turned toward Kelton, who gave no look of encouragement, but puffed at his pipe, quietly awaiting whatever response his remark should call forth. There was a silence, lengthened awkwardly. Then Ives shifted restlessly again, and spoke: —

"I wish — " he began; but stopped to choose another method of attack. "Look here!" said he. "I want to tell you something, — I wonder how much you know."

"A good deal of what there is to know, I imagine," the prospective confidant returned; "largely by putting together the pieces of a Chinese puzzle, — I was always good at that. These fit reasonably well, — yet one can't always be sure, till the thing is done. Of one thing *you* may be sure, however, — namely, that the result reached thus far has not been communicated."

"I could never have doubted that," Ives hastened to say; "yet — yet — I more than half believed that you were to be credited with some direct evidence of the senses."

"And if I were unlucky enough to be so *dis*credited," was the answer, gravely spoken, "that would make no difference."

"No; none, of course. Then let me confirm a part of what you have guessed, or inferred, — what, at any rate, you know, — that on a certain night of last spring I became engaged to the lady there."

Kelton nodded.

"Furthermore — and I suppose that you have fitted this piece, also, reasonably well — the engagement was broken almost immediately — of course, by her."

Kelton nodded again. "I inferred that," he admitted. "And she gave a reason, I suppose; or was it merely — "

"Merely that she did not care for me enough; she had reflected, and reflection had induced a change of heart. There was no other reason; at least, none that she would give me."

"I see; nothing strange in that. The strange thing is that they take any of us, constituted as they are. It's a sad, perplexing business; I'm very sorry; but that was long ago. Does she give you, always, the same good reason?"

"No; for I have never asked her to repeat it."

"Then ask — and ask again? Keep asking! Why, man alive, Jack Morton was refused seven times, they say, before his wife took him; now he has seven children, — one for each refusal!"

"Ah," said Ives, in melancholy amusement, "you always draw a deadly parallel. She is not Mrs. Jack Morton."

"No; she is different, I understand, very different. They always are; but all have one corner alike at the bottom of their hearts. They want to be followed up, hunted down, admired, courted; to feel the joy of the chase: without it, they are defrauded; they need to be told that they *are* different, — do you see?"

"Yes, if the right man tells them. In this case, I am more than half persuaded that he is some one else."

Kelton smiled. "You 're not jealous of me, are you?"

"Of you no more than any other; and yet why not? Stranger things have happened. If there were a right man, — you or another, — it would account for all."

"Including her first thought; which was to take you, *faute de mieux!*" said Kelton, puffing again at his pipe. "'Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind.' You 're in a parlous state, my boy, — you have all the symptoms. Stranger things have happened, as you say; girls have turned back before now to waning generations. It may be that this one is dying for love of me, and that it is my duty to take pity on her. I 'll think about it; but, seriously, that there is any one, beside yourself, with the smallest ghost of a chance, I don't believe."

"And if there were," asked Ives, gloomily, "how could you know that?"

"I could n't. I don't; yet one thing I do know which ought to interest you, — that she is most unhappy."

"Really?" said Ives, brightening. "That 's the best news I have heard yet."

"I thought you would like it," Kelton rejoined, dryly; "and, somehow, you 're responsible, I 'll swear. Damn it, man, you are making her uncomfortable, and, if I don't mistake, you enjoy it! Here 's another thing to cheer you. If you 're not the right man for her, you are for John Ashley. He wants you."

"Does he? Are you sure?" asked Ives, eagerly.

"Yes; he has told me that in so many words."

Ives pondered, and knit his brows in a new doubt. "Ah, well!" he sighed. "I don't want to marry him. His opposition might be better for me."

Kelton laughed. "You have hit it, I believe. Things are cured by contraries in heart-matters, if not in medicine. Ashley is too enthusiastic; we shall have to hold him in."

"She took me at first, did n't she?" murmured Ives, reviewing the ground. "That counts for something."

"For a great deal, taking one consideration with another."

Ives sighed again, knocked the ashes from his cigar, and rose to go. "Good-night!" he said. "Thank you for listening to all this, and for all that you have told me."

Kelton, coming over to the table, caught up the photograph. "You won't change your mind and take this?" he asked. "No? Well, then, good-night! Remember my advice by its three mystic letters: K. O. A. — Keep on asking!"

Ives shook his head gravely. "No," he said, "I will not badger her to death. She knows my views on that score. I am always here, waiting in the dark; she need give but the smallest sign; and so, — why, I shall keep on waiting. Thanks for your mystic letters, all the same."

Kelton, following him to the door, shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I'm not a fool," he remarked. "I never give advice, you know, expecting it to be taken; but are n't you making it a bit hard for her — in the dark — in the dark?"

Again, Ives shook his head. "Ah!" he answered, "she has clear eyes."

With that parting statement of negation, he passed out along the dimly lighted hall, up the stairs.

Kelton, lingering on the threshold, listened to the retreating footsteps. When the door above had closed upon them, he stepped back into the room, closing his own door and, with unwonted precaution, turning the key. With hands thrust deep into his pockets, he stood still a moment to survey the general disorder of the place. Then he puffed into it a cloud of smoke, drew a long breath, and began resolutely to set his house in order.

The chairs came first. When these were disposed safely, he turned to the cabinet, and took up the old frame to put it away where he remembered leaving it, in the drawer of his writing-table. As he opened the drawer, his glance fell immediately upon a leather card-case lying there within it.

"Exactly so," he muttered. "I knew I had dropped that at the races."

He stowed away the frame, and shut the drawer. The loose papers on the table he quickly rearranged in piles counterfeiting neatness; scattering, as he did so, with a flick of his handkerchief some of the dust accumulated there. Then he picked up Miss Ashley's likeness, and held it under the light for long consideration.

"Yes," he said at last; "she has clear eyes!"

As if the prolonged look were final, he made an impulsive movement to tear the card in two; but, in a second impulse, changed his mind. Instead of destroying, he chose rather to preserve it carefully. So determined, opening the cabinet, he uncovered one of its lacquered boxes and deposited the photograph in that obscure hiding-place.

"Clever at her tricks, the spiteful little Middlecot!" he murmured, as he locked the cabinet door; "one ill turn deserved another, and she paid me back with a vengeance. How much better she builded than she knew!"

XVIII

TIME AND NATURE

At Campfield, during the first few days of her uncle's convalescence, Dorothy found joy in everything; in the old familiar house of ample spaces within and without; in the sunny garden with its vine-covered arbor overlooking a wide reach of the Connecticut winding down among the hills; and in the more limited view from the front window-seat of her own chamber, through the horse-chestnut branches to the elms that overarched the unpaved street for a mile of its course, — until, in fact, it narrowed to a country road again. The shops were far away, down at the four corners. Here, at "the court end," came no disturbing sounds of traffic. Behind their white fences, their grass-plots and clumps of shrubbery, the houses stood apart in dignified seclusion, giving the whole neighborhood an air of old-time comfort and tranquillity.

The little town has changed scarcely at all in three generations. It was an old town when the first of these began, filled with traditions of the Indian wars, which are still fondly cherished. Savage implements and weapons line the walls of the picturesque Academy; and memorial wayside tablets startle the chance visitor with grim records of siege and massacre that impart solemnity to the shadows of the quiet street even at noonday. In the long summer twilight these same shadows grow almost oppressive in their significance. Through them all, memory of the fearful past hovers like an exhalation, with the strange, haunting charm, — indefinable, uncanny, yet still a charm, — which distinguishes Campfield from the rank and file of New England villages.

The community, however, was a world in itself with a world's harassing problems underlying that prevalent serenity which impressed the passing stranger. Straggling off towards Morgan's Corner there had sprung up "a bad end," where congregated the less fortunate class that is to be found in all communities; where intemperance and lawlessness were not unknown; where the men were lazy and shiftless, the women disheartened, overburdened with care, amid their swarms of children whose future concerned all who stopped to consider it. The propensity of New England to hunt up abuses for amendment, that Reform may never sleep, but proceed almost in perpetual motion, was here met halfway. Morgan's Corner, in plain sight, enforced contemplation; one might be momentarily forgiven for not seeking obscure delinquencies elsewhere.

Dorothy had given time and thought to "the bad end" in the past; serving upon committees and laboring individually to sow the seeds of aspiration there. The neighborhood clubroom, established for rest and recreation of the women, was due to her suggestion. She had helped to employ idle hands in basket-making or carpet-weaving, and by finding a market for the native products to turn the work to practical account. The commerce, to be sure, was on no very extensive scale, but, at first, it had been more than reasonably successful. Then doubts, differences of opinion, discussions, even open quarrels had arisen; and the harmonizing of conflicting elements had not always proved an easy task. Through all these fluctuations, however, thanks to the persistence of Miss Ashley and her associates, the good work was kept alive, and it still went on.

When the exhilarating effect due to the return was over, there came a reaction of which Dorothy soon grew conscious, though she imperfectly comprehended the cause. The days were longer than of old; the round of occupations was singularly limited, while native interest in its own reformation had certainly flagged. New problems concerning it presented themselves one after another. Walking home, one afternoon, after a long, discouraging attempt to solve some of them at a committee meeting, it seemed to her that they had talked against time, arriving at no result. Her opinion had been set aside. She was of no mortal use. They could settle these questions, or leave them unsettled, exactly as well without her. She could not go on forever in this way, making her whole life a futile consideration of schemes for petty local improvement. The very sound of the word "charity" was almost distasteful to her; she would not permit herself to be identified solely with it. As matters tended, she stood in positive danger of losing her grip on everything else, for slow transformation into a kind of charitable machine. The prospect was odious. Surely, life ought to include more enlivening power than that!

A narrow, green lane ran down by the side of the Ashley place toward the river, and Dorothy turned off that way to prolong her walk. It led to the old village graveyard on the river-bank. The acre of ground, long disused, but well cared for, shaded by fine trees and bright with flowers, had outlived its burden of grief, like all such sanctuaries when time and nature have mellowed them. The associations of its quaint headstones and worn inscriptions were no longer keenly sad, but of the gentlest melancholy, suggesting only what enviable repose had befallen these early settlers in the ideal spot where they had sunk to sleep. A memorial of dangers past and trials nobly borne, ending in eternal peace, it enshrined for Dorothy all the finer traditions of Campfield. She loved especially one corner of it down by the river, where under a spreading elm tree she could sit and watch the current glide along at her feet,—a place of rest and silence, sacred to the past, in all schemes for improvement mercifully overlooked, unaltered.

To-day, however, Miss Ashley seemed to carry with her into this favorite retreat the restlessness of the present, its cares and its disturbances. She could not forget the trivial narrowness of the local controversies. The gentle flow of the river reminded her that its ever broadening course swept down to cities and the world. She longed to be borne away with it, if only to other cares that, at least, would be of wider scope; but no sooner was the longing admitted, than she became vexed at her own dissatisfaction, and sought to account for it. She was tired, she supposed; bored, she knew; morbid, perhaps, dwelling more upon herself than was habitual or wise. What could be the matter? Had her short term of life in town made old, simpler forms of it distasteful? Did she crave the whirling vortex? If so, she would do better to join forces with her uncle, who was off in two days for Newport, to set the seal upon his recovery. She had declined with thanks his invitation, which, of course, could be reconsidered. Why not? No! She did not need excitement. She preferred to stay in Campfield which she loved. That last attempt at explanation was preposterous. It had been a hot day, — a rasping one, no more, no less, — and the conditions had oppressed her. Now that the sun was getting low, already she felt better. She must go home and make ready for her opposite neighbor, old Mrs. Ludlam, who was coming in to tea.

She took the shorter way out, turning down by a marble headstone, which always had for her a strange, irresistible interest, since it bore her own name. That earlier Dorothy Ashley had belonged to a remote branch of the family, now extinct, had died unmarried at twenty-five, and had slept there in that angle of the path for more than sixty years. Probably there were none alive who could recall her looks. According to tradition, she had lived all her short life in Campfield, — a life without reproach. Beyond this vague remembrance she had become a name upon a monument, no more; but the name was a good one, carved in imperishable marble. Always, in passing, her namesake lingered a moment with reverent sympathy, longing to know more of her predecessor than was here recorded. She had received from this source a direct inheritance; for there had been no other Dorothy in the family, and her own mother, liking the name and its associations, had chosen it for her. They had buried her mother in the new cemetery at the farther end of the town; but often in life she must have passed this way, and stopped at this same corner. The thought made it for Dorothy a spot doubly sacred.

To-day, a cobweb trailed over the inscription, and there were fallen leaves in the grass. Dorothy knelt to brush them all away, and sighed as she read once more the name and dates. "How limited that life!" she thought; "here, in this dull place for all her days! but the world, since then, has moved; we know more of it, demand more of it; perhaps these very limitations made her all the happier, content with little."

As she walked on, she soon decided that no one could hope to be happy, nowadays, after the manner of a former generation. Modern problems were surging up, and modern thought must grapple with them, making the world better if it could, even though it wore itself out in the process. So, shifting her burden of perverse nature from her own shoulders to the broader ones of the age in which her lot was cast, she came up into the village street, to find her old friend, Mrs. Ludlam, in the act of crossing it. Here was a case in point, aptly confuting these new-formed theories. Her neighbor, a widow and childless, had encountered more than her share of trial and disappointment; yet had lived all troubles down, harking back in her field of life to the simplicity of childhood. So far as one could judge, contentment, placid and serene, defined her condition. Yes, but she had grown old. That explained her. With age, a softening haze must come over the landscape, blotting out the horizon. When the senses were mercifully blunted, one would naturally accept what came nearest to the hand, without any straining of the eyes or racking of the brains over the distant prospect. The comfort of the present; the past a half-forgotten dream tinged with the hues of sunset; the future behind the veil, ignored, inappreciable! Truly, that would be the peace of Arcady! Throughout the visit, across the tea-table, with envy never felt before, Dorothy contemplated her guest, purring like a comfortable cat, all amiability and satisfaction. If only she, too, could just be old!

In this downcast mood, which recurred intermittently during the next few days, she was cheered by a letter from Alice Orbitt fixing the date of a visit to Campfield that had been under consideration between them. Her arrival followed close upon Mr. Ashley's departure for Newport, giving the two friends a clear field to themselves. There was never anything morbid about "the best of all the Orbitts," who seemed now in unusually high spirits. If she found any lack of these on Dorothy's part, she took care not to mention it. In their walks and drives together she made sunshine in shady places; hand and glove with all the neighbors in no time, she became a cheering influence throughout the village, welcomed heartily wherever she went; bringing also a fresh point of view to bear upon some of the debatable problems, with an occasional quiet word of suggestion both sound and tactful. Her interest, easily aroused, was always keen; her enthusiasm of the moment refreshing to all who came within hailing distance of it. She dealt with these new conditions as if none could be more eventful in her life.

During the visit she entertained Dorothy with much lively gossip of town friends and acquaintances who were far removed from the quiet Campfield ways. Mr. Turner had gone abroad, presumably to rally from his latest unsuccessful affair of the heart, — the latest, not the last, by any means! The Middlecots had given a succession of house-parties at their place on the shore, to one of which, she, herself, was asked, but had been unavoidably detained at home by guests of her own. Did Dorothy know that the same energetic lady talked of getting up a semi-public fête, on a grand scale, for her pet charity in the early autumn? Some sort of a resplendent lawn-party, it was, with special features, and in costume. Probably, the vast idea had worn her out; since she had suddenly sped away with Mr. Middlecot to the Montclair Inn, not a dozen miles off in this very neighborhood, for a fortnight of rest and change. Even the so-called indefatigable leaders of fashion were human, like the rest of us. The women, that is to say, — the men were different. Mr. Hyatt and Mr. Trent were very much in evidence, — here, there, and everywhere, just as usual. And Mr. Ives —

"And Mr. Ives!" It was not long before Dorothy observed the frequent recurrence of this name in Miss Orbitt's chronicle of experience, — always, as she remembered afterward, with a note of admiration. At first, she assented in a general way with easy cordiality to opinions concerning his good looks, agreeable manners, and unassuming force of character. Yes, he showed marked ability, and she believed that he was distinguishing himself, as Alice said, in the house of Ashley and Company. Then, becoming a little tired of hearing Aristides called the Just, half suspecting, too, that the frequent introduction of his name might be artfully premeditated, she grew more guarded in her replies: reluctant to confide, determined not to betray herself, changing the subject abruptly. As Alice at once took the hint, easily following her lead, the vague suspicion of a hidden motive gradually died away. In the end her decision was that Alice's speech, entirely artless, revealed a personal interest in Mr. Ives, of which, as yet, the speaker was unaware. Was there a corresponding interest on his part? Dorothy idly wondered. Since nothing in all Alice's talk indicated that, or any approach to intimate relations between the two, the wonder like the suspicion died away. Alice had the gift of seeing others at their best, and never hesitated to express her liking. Remembering this, one need not consider her present mild enthusiasms too seriously.

Her visit, in due course, came to an end, and on the last morning Dorothy drove with her to the station. When the train drew up, Alice found her seat in it, and leaning out of the window received last messages of remembrance for several of their friends; to which Dorothy appended sportively: —

" And not forgetting Mr. Hyatt and Mr. Trent, of course, dear ! "

" And Mr. Ives ? " Alice flashed back, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes, as the train began to move.

Whereupon, unhesitatingly, Dorothy returned in the same jesting spirit : —

" Oh, Mr. Ives, too, by all means ! "

Joke as it was, she had not meant to be drawn into saying just that. The last car rushed by, and she stood alone upon the platform, looking after it in smiling wonderment. Then she drove toward home, still idly wondering.

She turned into Main Street, and perceived, afar off, a victoria and pair which she failed to identify as it gradually drew nearer. " Strangers in town ! " she thought. Then, presently, the horses stopped at her own gate ; and, hurrying on, she alighted in time to welcome Mrs. Middlecot, who, having arisen as she declared at daybreak, thus descended upon her from the distant Montclair Inn.

"Though, to tell the truth, I had n't an idea of coming here,—I thought it much too far!" confessed that enterprising lady. "I drove over to the Falls to call upon Mrs. Sterritt, this lovely morning; but she had gone away for the day,—and finding you were only a short four miles farther, I just came on. What an enchanting spot! You know I have never been in Campfield."

Dorothy at once took possession of her for an indefinite number of hours. The horses must rest, of course; and the return drive would be far more comfortable in the late afternoon. To these hospitable schemes Mrs. Middlecot readily assented, settling down in good country fashion to spend the day.

The unexpected guest was in holiday mood, delighted with all she saw as they strolled through the village before luncheon; and, afterward, over the table, at her merriest, by turns receptive and communicative, she commented shrewdly upon the way of the world as she descried it, eager to impart her knowledge, yet not forgetting that Dorothy must have an individual point of view which it would be worth while to know. Wanting to know was always the amiable weakness of Mrs. Middlecot, which, making her a good listener, contributed not a little to the charm of her light conversation.

Two small matters in which she sought enlightenment hovered at the back of her mind that summer afternoon. Upon hearing that Alice Orbitt had just left Campfield, it became easy to introduce the first, namely, a pleasant wonder whether the new interest of Mr. Ives in the Orbitt family might not, as she expressed it, lead to something.

"You see, my dear, he seems to be quite devoted. They take long walks together, as I happen to know; and, the other day, when I invited her to West Cove, she had friends coming at home. There was only one friend, — Staunton Ives, — *and he came!* It would n't be so bad a match, would it? — if it were really to be."

So Mrs. Middlecot chattered on, glad to find that her companion rose, as it were, to the interesting suggestion, and readily discussed its possibility. Possible, however, not probable, was Dorothy's final word about it; though, even as she professed so much, her remembrance of Alice's frequent allusions to Mr. Ives almost seemed to reverse the scales of judgment; but she made no retraction, and loyally withheld the important bit of evidence which might well have confirmed Mrs. Middlecot's surmises. The affair, if affair it could be called, was Alice's. Why should she betray her by citing those chance, incautious words? Possible, not probable, therefore, her own last word remained. It was the only admission she would make; and with it, in the end, Mrs. Middlecot apparently agreed.

The other mild wonder, clouding for the moment Mrs. Middlecot's brain, intimately concerned Dorothy herself, and thus could only be brought up by indirection. Having discovered through a happy accident, which had enabled her, as she expressed it, dramatically "to get back at him," that her former lover and sharply cynical antagonist, Humphrey Kelton, carried in his pocket a likeness of Miss Ashley, — delightful circumstance, signifying admiration at least, if nothing deeper, — Mrs. Middlecot longed to ascertain if there were any correspondent feeling, deep or otherwise, on Miss Ashley's part; not by any method so crude as to tell Dorothy of the photograph incident with feigned artlessness and watch its effect upon her. No; the merest hint of this would only put her on her guard, and defeat its purpose. That little secret might better rest where it was. She had cleverly stabbed Kelton in the back with it; her stiletto wound would rankle long, and she need not irritate him further. No, indeed, not at all! Her curiosity must be satisfied by surer and less obvious means.

The very simple plan she devised was merely to speak Kelton's name, as if with no premeditation whatever, and study the impression produced by that cursory reference. This was not so easy as it seemed, and she spent some time in beating about the bush; feeling that the name should present itself casually and unexpectedly without apparent effort to lug it in. Meanwhile, she talked of many things, particularly of her prospective charitable fête, after a leading question from Dorothy, who remembered that Alice Orbitt had spoken vaguely of such a scheme.

The fête! Oh, yes, the fête! On her grounds at West Cove, in costume, for the Orphan Industries! Public announcement would soon be made, with a long list of patronesses, and all promised well. The period fixed upon was French, — late Louis Quinze and early Louis Seize, — plenty of latitude there! The pantomime troupe of the Folies Nouvelles, coming out from Paris to tour the country, had been secured for a preliminary performance, — a lovely little thing in the style of Fragonard. She had found a perfect place for that, — a small natural amphitheatre down by the sea. It was this professional feature that had delayed all until autumn; for the troupe would not reach our shores until about the first of September. Soon after that it was to be, — between the tenth and fifteenth, probably.

A little idea of her own was, perhaps, the best of all, if she did say it, — that of reproducing a number of personages out of history with great accuracy of detail. Mrs. Sterritt, for instance, had promised to do Madame du Barry; she, herself, was studying Marie Antoinette; Mr. Middlecot had chosen Cagliostro. She had many others in mind, was busy looking up points, to compare them with faces and figures of all her friends, and had thought of Turgot for Mr. Ashley, — distinguished financier, my dear, quite in character! And, — here, Mrs. Middlecot, suddenly seeing her way, proceeded cautiously to follow it.

After the drawing of other fancied parallels, in which Dorothy, amused by the game, took an active part, Mrs. Middlecot declared that she was in search of a Voltaire; they must have one, of course. His ideal representative existed, if the man could only be persuaded, but the difficulty was to get him. Now, what did Dorothy think? Would there be any use in trying for her uncle's queer friend, Mr. Kelton?

The well-aimed shaft struck the gold only to rebound, leaving behind it no perceptible impression; for Dorothy, with a mild shrug of disdain, answered unhesitatingly that in her opinion Mr. Kelton was sure to refuse point-blank any such request. Of course, her uncle would be willing to make the demand, if Mrs. Middlecot desired him to do so; but that would simply be time wasted, since Mr. Kelton's refusal was likely not only to be immediate and final, but also profanely emphatic.

Never, in reality, having counted upon Kelton's aid for a single instant, Mrs. Middlecot at once recognized the soundness of these remarks. Neither in the matter nor the manner of them could she detect any sign of tenderness, or even of "a coming-on disposition." She had applied her test, proving under it, to her complete satisfaction, that Dorothy's attitude of mind remained normal, with no feeling toward Mr. Kelton other than one of indifference. So much the better! She mentally congratulated herself both upon her own cleverness and the pleasing result thereby demonstrated.

Later she drove away, declaring her day to have been more than delightful, and charging Dorothy to return to town in time to help her in the last preparations for the fête.

"There are so many hooks and eyes, — loose ends, I mean, always to tie up!" she said at parting. "Remember, I count upon you for my Princesse de Lamballe; you 're to find me another Voltaire, too, if you can!"

And to do her best upon all these essential points Dorothy promised with a reassuring smile.

The afternoon had flown, under the diversion of that exaggerated importance which Mrs. Middlecot attached to trivial things. One thing, however, upon which her visitor had dwelt somewhat insistently, appeared to Dorothy less trivial, the more she considered it. Its increasing weight oppressed her, until she strove by arguing with herself to lighten the load. Why should she find cause for uneasiness in the apparently progressive intimacy of Staunton Ives and Alice Orbitt, even though that should progress so far as to result in the most intimate relation allotted to human existence? What did it matter? Had she not dismissed all thought of that relation for herself? She had turned away her accepted suitor, had shut the door and left him alone in the dark. Yes; but he had refused to go. According to his word, he would wait outside, within call, for a lifetime if need be, always the same, unchanged, hoping for her change of heart. A man so sure as that, surely, ought to know his own mind.

Well, but if he had not known it? What more natural, after all, than that his own heart should change through time and circumstance? That must be the meaning of this new interest which all signs seemed to prove reciprocal. Men were fickle, of course, — proverbially so; witness, the poets and the sages! She could not hope to hold one of the restless sex, enslaved in outer darkness, forever and a day. That would be folly; but in so short a time to waver and recant! She had thought better of him than that.

Once again, what could it matter? She had taken the wrong man for the right one, and, upon awakening to the fact, had found him wanting and rejected him, — properly enough. Why should it vex her that he, in turn, had awakened to the fact that she was the wrong woman, and had found the right one, who wanted what she did not? In that case her vexation would make her unreasonable, ridiculous, a very dog in the manger. No, she was not that! It must be merely his inconstant disposition, a sense of disappointment in him that annoyed her upon general grounds. She took a large view, and despised masculine weakness wherever she detected it. That explained all. Anything else was inconceivable. Yet it was strange, indeed, how the frailty of all mankind beset her. She grew, in fact, bitterly annoyed by it; and, while refusing to admit her likeness to the fabled dog in the manger, she found herself, none the less, upon general grounds ridiculous, unreasonable.

XIX

A DAUGHTER OF NEW ENGLAND

The long summer burned itself out at last; and on the tenth of September Dorothy came back to town to pass a few days in the oasis with the Canterburys before opening her uncle's house. Mr. Ashley wrote that there need be no hurry about this; for, though now strong as an ox, he meant to play invalid awhile longer and should not return until October. He had notified Mrs. Middlecot that absence would prevent his taking part in her Masque of Orphans, as he playfully described it; but he had sent in a subscription to the cause which would mitigate the pangs of disappointment. Furthermore, he urged Dorothy to make herself resplendent in the costume of the Princesse de Lamballe, for which all bills were to be sent to him. If she failed to look her best in a dress that outshone all others, he should be much dissatisfied.

Dorothy laughed at these injunctions, so like her uncle and wholly manlike, as she declared. Did he suppose for one instant that in these matters she could compete successfully with Mrs. Middlecot as Marie Antoinette, or her friend, Mrs. Sterritt, as Madame du Barry, or any other of a dozen high-stepping dames whose names and titles were recorded? Why, even Mrs. Canterbury, entering the lists, might easily have distanced her; if only that good soul, habitually resolute, now after much wavering had not weakly decided that she would rather hear about it all afterward than take the trouble to go!

The fête was fixed for the afternoon of the seventeenth. During the week that intervened, Dorothy flew back and forth, feverishly assisting Mrs. Middlecot in those final adjustments which were deemed essential to success. She brought back glowing reports of progress. West Cove was at its best, and the public showed more than the requisite eagerness. Nearly all tickets were sold. The two hemicycles of historic men and women had been carefully rehearsed and were grouped superbly. The pantomime would have a perfect setting. All must go wonderfully, if only the weather were fine!

In spite of her enthusiasm and apparent devotion to these preliminaries, occasional contradictory signs in Dorothy's behavior denoted that some of the excitement at least was forced. At times, she became strangely silent, preoccupied even; often, even when her spirits were at the highest, her eyes had a tired look. "She is worn out, — no wonder!" Mrs. Canterbury thought; and, thankful that the fête-day was so near, decided to prescribe thorough rest after it. Then, keenly aroused, studying the symptoms carefully, she began to wonder if Dorothy's fatigue were wholly physical; thence, passing swiftly to the conclusion that the poor child had something on her mind. Yes, it might well be; since even Goff had noticed that Dorothy was not quite herself, and had said so in the watches of the night. "Nonsense!" had been her sharp reply to him. "She is bored to death with this Orphan business; that 's all!" Goff was just a man,—just Goff; if she encouraged him in vague suspicions, his mind might get working; in an absent, incautious mood he would be sure to come out with something injudicious. The less said, the better, at present. She would keep her own counsel scrupulously until the proper moment; there might be nothing in it, after all; yet, struggling thus to conquer her own suspicions, Mrs. Canterbury remained unconvinced, at heart disquieted.

What could the matter be? With the strain of Mr. Ashley's illness well over, there was nothing obvious to trouble Dorothy in the least. Mrs. Canterbury's thought leaped at once to unrequited love; but of that, hitherto, she had seen not the smallest sign. It had been her secret hope that Staunton Ives, whom she particularly liked, might detach himself from the background, come to the front and prove acceptable. That combination would have pleased her mightily; but, instead of that, she found him cold and colorless, lacking hopelessly in self-assertion. She had longed to do something about it, to stick pins into him, to spur him on; but then, Dorothy seemed to be peculiarly "offish" with him, whenever they met in her presence. How could the poor fellow help holding back, if she treated him in that way?

After all, he was one of many among Dorothy's young men. Unless he were the right one, — and it certainly began to look as if he were not, — there was no sort of use in worrying about him longer, since tastes could neither be accounted for, nor created out of the whole cloth. Dorothy, probably, was interested in some one else, who did not dream of the happy circumstance; in which case, the spurs might be applicable in that direction, as yet unknown. It now became Mrs. Canterbury's duty, as she conceived it, to verify this last surmise and determine the true north, so to speak, if there was one, letting the subsequent course of her ingenuity and common sense depend upon verification or discovery.

Hoping by tactful means to induce a confidential disclosure in some favoring moment, Mrs. Canterbury found it wisest to postpone action until the fête was over, when Dorothy, who was to pass the night before and the night after it with Mrs. Middlecot, would have returned to quiet life. So, on the sixteenth, ignoring symptoms, she "heartened up" her guest to the utmost, helped her in packing with many a good wish for success, and watched her drive away cheered into spirits so buoyant that the weather prospects seemed to be the deepest consideration upon her mind. In this respect the forecasts were most encouraging, and the morning, when it dawned, bore them out. Never was a finer autumnal day. As it proceeded, Mrs. Canterbury repented her lack of energy, and wished she were treading the lawn at West Cove in eighteenth-century costume, under the cloudless sky. It really would have been worth the trouble, if only to keep an eye upon Dorothy, and, perhaps, discover things!

Her mind dwelt upon these lost festal possibilities, public and private, all the afternoon. When Mr. Kelton dropped in at tea-time, she reproached him for not buying a ticket. Had he not heard that he was particularly wanted for the part of Voltaire? No; certainly not, he assured her. They knew better than to suggest his lending himself to any such nonsense; as well ask Goff to pose as Louis Quinze! Then he condemned fiercely what he called the ingenious wastefulness of fashionable charity schemes. If all the money squandered upon costumes in this case, for instance, had been simply handed over to the treasurer of the Orphan Industries, how much more the cause would have profited.

"Yes, but it would n't have been handed over, don't you see!" returned Mrs. Canterbury, promptly rallying to defend the subtle feminine methods of finance. "Here they get something for their money, or think they do; they have to be enticed; you can't wrench it out of 'em. Why, if I had gone to you with a subscription-book, you would have smiled politely, and shown me the door. Come now, would n't you?"

"Most assuredly, I should!" laughed Kelton, taking to the door, himself. "But then, I'm no criterion. What have I to do with orphans or orphans with me?"

"Nothing; more 's the pity!" she called after him, as he departed.

The morning newspapers of the following day devoted to the benevolent enterprise much valuable space, emphasized by head-lines employing every adjective of enthusiasm current in the journalistic vocabulary. The fête had been unique, resplendent, superb, and sumptuous in its effects, — a dazzling triumph. The amazing skill of the French dancers in their pantomime was pronounced incomparable. Then came a descriptive list of costumes, copiously minute; accurate, too, if one could judge by the report of the Princesse de Lamballe, — the only dress which Mrs. Canterbury had seen. She procured all the accounts and studied them with such care that she soon knew most of the details by heart. The minuet danced by the "Royal Group," so-called, with Mrs. Middlecot as the Queen, — in rose, of course, bepowdered, beplumed, bepatched, — especially interested her. Mr. Staunton Ives had figured as the Comte de Fersen, Miss Alice Orbitt as Madame Royale. It must, indeed, have been, as one reporter declared, a dream of regal days; and the Orphan Industries were enriched by thousands! She wondered whether Humphrey Kelton would sniff at that!

Later, bringing with her an afterglow of the carnival, came Dorothy, enthusiastic as the best of the printed notices, and far more satisfactory from the intimate point of view of Mrs. Canterbury, who felt after the first half-hour of uninterrupted radiance as if she had seen everything herself. Then followed her comments and her questionings, — the latter innumerable. But Dorothy cheerfully answered them all, reviewing the subject in the same lively manner a second time, when Miss Kitty Colt ran round, as she said, just for five minutes to drink a cup of tea; in fact, deliberately to settle down for a long visit, wherein Miss Ashley's powers of description were thoroughly tested. In Miss Colt's case, the comment and inquiry that ensued leaned to the professional side of things and were supplemented by reminiscence of a long-forgotten past. These new-fangled dancers and their pretty pantomime must be worth seeing, of course; but she remembered certain Viennese children who were famous in the forties and fifties. And then, Fanny Elssler! *She* had danced, as only Rachel could act. Ah! if you young people had lived then! And Miss Colt, thanking Heaven she was old enough to remember and not too old to forget, went home happy in her newly acquired knowledge which brought her up to date, but sighing, too, over dates more memorable. There were giantesses in those days!

After the excitement, the reaction! The next morning, Dorothy awoke with a severe headache and kept her room all day. On the following one she was up and about, but with a very mild interest in the day's events, absorbed in something which induced the now familiar silences, the distressing air of preoccupation. "She looks as if she were preyed upon!" Mrs. Canterbury thought; and, resolving to "get at it," with a recurrence of her old suspicion, she entered systematically upon a probing process. At a convenient opportunity she harked back to the fête and to Dorothy's young men, whether present or absent from it. To allay possible distrust, she began with Staunton Ives, whom she knew best among them all, for whom it was therefore natural enough that she should inquire particularly; of whom, too, as she now recollected, Dorothy had said little on the day of her return. That might mean something, though probably it did n't!

Dorothy seemed, at once, unconsciously to enter the trap. Mr. Ives? Oh, yes! He was Count Fersen, in a becoming dress, — blue-and-white, she believed. He had danced in the Royal Minuet, as she had done, — only that she was in the other set; there had been eight couples in all, and her partner was that nice Mr. Dallas from Delaware, — Dellwer, he called it, — a house-guest of Mrs. Middlecot. She and Mr. Ives had joined hands in the dance when their turn came, but had hardly met at all, before or after. Strange, that? Oh, no! not in the least, among so many. He had gone away with the Orbitts, staying with them overnight, presumably. Why, Alice was his partner in the dance, of course; she thought she had mentioned that; and why was Mrs. Canterbury so especially interested in Mr. Staunton Ives?

"Because, my dear, I'm so especially fond of him," that lady hastened to reply. "Mr. Ives has scored a hit, as Kitty Colt would say, in this family. My husband thinks he is a remarkably fine fellow, sure to go far and do tremendous things. He made 'the great refusal,' Goff says, whatever that means, and proved his strength of character by sticking to the last that fitted him. 'The eighth wise man!' he calls him; so I suppose there were only seven before, though who *they* are, I can't tell you; but do you know, I've had a fancy, my dear, that perhaps, some day, Mr. Ives and you —"

Here, Mrs. Canterbury broke off abruptly, feeling that she had gone far enough, if not too far; but Dorothy laughed the suggestion lightly away. And, having passed that fear, the grand inquisitor, pursuing her crafty scheme, plunged recklessly on to Mr. Hyatt, Mr. Trent, Mr. Drake, and other of the young men whom she knew by sight or hearsay, with all her faculties intent upon the unconscious victim, as each name was spoken; eliciting, however, no clue that appeared to her in the smallest degree significant.

Thus ended the first investigation in discouraging defeat. Mrs. Canterbury helplessly left the important matter hanging in the air, for the time being. She would try again, of course, and, by hook or crook, find a lead to follow up. Could there be a charm to conjure with in "that nice Mr. Dallas from Delaware," of whom she had never heard before. Here was a new idea. She must sleep on that, and think it over; yet, "pockety dark" she called the prospect now.

Proverbially, the darkest hour is that before the dawn, and Mrs. Canterbury had reason now to recall the time-worn adage. With the dawn came an unexpected and all-powerful ally in the shape of that week's number of the "Loophole," — the well-known social chronicle, issued in New York, to which Mrs. Canterbury was a faithful subscriber. Indeed, she was accustomed to say that she got all her news from it; and though the news was neither weighty in substance nor in style profound, the paper certainly contrived to deal comprehensively, if superficially, with what many worthy people were discussing at the moment. It presented always, to be sure, one solid article by an expert writer, — well worth reading, as all readers agreed, whether they read it or not. The rest was composed of trifles, personalities, shreds of gossip, cleverly combined to catch the eyes of those walking within the cabalistic circle of fashion, or just without it, — in either case, a contingent fairly profitable, from its tendency to ignore other companionship in its progress through the world; and that no such possible purchaser might escape, there were always, of pleasantly conjectural authorship, seven unsigned letters from seven important cities of our Republic. In short, it belonged to a kind of Oriental bazaar among newspapers, heaped with glittering trash, revealing occasionally a remnant, as the collectors say, "of value."

Mrs. Canterbury opened the "Loophole," that morning, at a long description of the "Dustries," as the great Chilworth, who had been detailed to "cover" Mrs. Middlecot's festival, facetiously designated it. A hurried reading convinced her that the article was very well done,—"the best yet!" she thought. At that moment, Nancy, the maid, passed the door with Dorothy's breakfast-tray. She called her back, and turning down the leaf,—the only one she had seen,—sent the paper up with the coffee and the muffins. "Tell her to read that," she directed; "I know she will enjoy it." Then, half an hour later, eager to pass judgment upon Chilworth's discriminating performance, she went upstairs, herself, to knock at Dorothy's door.

There being no answer at first, she knocked again, more vigorously. "May I come in?" she asked. The reply, perceptibly delayed, was faint, scarcely audible: "Just a minute, please!"

She waited, accordingly, a full minute which seemed still longer, perplexed, impatient, somewhat annoyed; then, at the signal, went on into the room.

The dark shades had been partially lowered; and Dorothy sat in a low chair with her back to the source of such light as they admitted. She wore a loose wrapper, hastily flung about her; the newspaper lay on the floor in a crumpled heap; the breakfast-tray stood on the table at her side, hardly touched, as Mrs. Canterbury saw in the first glance.

"Good-morning, dear! I sent up the 'Loophole,'" she began, as she crossed the threshold; "and came to see —"

There the remark stopped; for in her second glance she dimly perceived that Dorothy's eyes were red and swollen.

"Why, my dear, what is it? What's the matter?" she urged.

"Nothing; nothing at all!" Dorothy assured her; and then, inconsistently, burst into tears.

"You poor child! What *is* the matter? Tell me!" insisted Mrs. Canterbury, moved almost to tears herself at the piteous spectacle. "You have been out of sorts for days; do you think I have n't seen?"

Drawing up a chair, she sat at Dorothy's side, and, changing her tactics, asked no questions, but devoted herself to soothing this violent sorrow until the paroxysm should have passed; in spite of it, strangely relieved at the thought that the crisis had come, at last. It could only be a question of time now; now she must surely know.

In fact, it was not long before Dorothy, responding to sympathy, murmured between her sobs: "The letter, — the letter in the paper!"

Divining at once that it must be the Boston correspondent whose barbed arrow had struck the hidden wound, Mrs. Canterbury caught up the "Loophole," and, turning to the Seven Cities, found her own in its proper place. It was represented by the usual contribution without signature, but generally attributed to the fluent pen of Miss Nora Gill.

"What can Nora have been saying?" she wondered, running through the page, whereon, not unnaturally, the writer's personal impression of Mrs. Middlecot's "event" formed the chief topic. Here were light, playful allusions to many of the company, — some of them, indeed, not too good-natured, — but none that seemed likely to have distressed Miss Ashley, whose appearance was dwelt upon in flattering terms.

Stay, what was this?

"The initiated observed with interest the marked attentions of a certain young nobleman in blue-and-silver to one of the ladies-in-waiting attached to the Royal Group. The uninformed, who may be curious, will not have long to wait for the solution of my tender enigma; since I hear authoritatively that the approaching union, for some time anticipated, of this sympathetic couple, so conspicuous in the highest social circles, will soon be announced formally to the world. Who knows? This may be the least among the happy consequences of the gala day. Doubtless, there are others!"

"Yes; that's Nora!" thought Mrs. Canterbury, looking back at an official list of the principal costumes, to verify her recollection.

"Mr. Staunton Ives: Comte de Fersen, — blue-and-white, with silver trimmings."

He had danced in the Royal Group; not with Dorothy, but with Alice Orbitt. Did this needle point to the true north, indeed?

Still in doubt whether or not the guess were a shrewd one, she tested its value by feigned assurance. Handing the paper to Dorothy, she said, confidently: —

"That's it, — I see, — Staunton Ives!"

Dorothy turned upon her a startled look.

"Why, Aunt Lois! How did you know?"

"There, — there! Nobody else has dreamed of it, Dorothy, dear; but now that I know so much and have kept it to myself, tell me all about it, do!"

At this, Dorothy broke down again completely; but in a few minutes she recovered herself and proceeded calmly to tell the whole story. Beginning with the engagement, she described the overwhelming fear that had led her to break it off within forty-eight hours; through what strange after-phases she had passed; how curiously she had learned, as if in a nightmare, of her uncle's wish; how she had been irritated by that and by the praises, echoed, reëchoed, forever ringing in her ears, of the man whom capriciously she had rejected; how, still determined never to reconsider an irrevocable conclusion, she fought against herself, irritated once more by her own obstinacy; until, alone at Campfield, when with apparent change of heart he had made an intimate friend of Alice Orbitt, she had suddenly awakened to the fact that her discarded lover was the man she really loved. Yes; it was he, and no other, — there never could be any one else! How, preparing to write to him, to recall him, she had discovered that it was then too late. What might have been foreseen had happened. Tired of waiting in the dark for a sign that never came, he had gone over to the enemy, — that is, to her friend, Alice; and everybody knew, everybody spoke of their probable engagement; it was almost certain that they were engaged already; and Alice was over head and heels in love with him!

Surprised beyond measure at these revelations of what, without her knowledge, had been going on "directly under her nose," as she silently reflected, Mrs. Canterbury might have posed for duplicity itself, so calm was she! As calm as if such intimate confidences of thrilling interest were items of her daily experience. Only at the end did she let herself go a little, trying, by way of comfort, not to make too light of the matter, nor yet, as it were, too dark.

"This is very sad, my dear; very dreadful; but there may be some terrible mistake. Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. I have been with them at the rehearsals, — have watched them for days."

"But how do you know that Alice is in love with him? Has she told you so?"

"No; now she hardly mentions his name; but you have only to see the two together to understand. Her looks, her eyes! She never takes them off him for a single instant! Oh, she loves him, you may be sure of that! Sure? I know!"

Mrs. Canterbury, after a thoughtful moment, spoke as if thinking aloud. "Alice may have caught him on the rebound, of course; but I don't believe it; and these notions of yours, Dorothy, may just be jealous fancies. Now, don't shrug your shoulders in that way, dear, as if jealousy were out of the question. Its germs are everywhere, and there 's no resisting 'em when they fasten on you. I only said it might be so. In any case, there is but one thing for you to do. You must call him back!"

Dorothy started. "What do you mean, Aunt Lois? If they are engaged — "

"That makes no difference. If so, it's a second thought of his, — and second thoughts are by no means best, whatever the proverb calls them, in affairs of the heart. You were his first choice. Didn't he tell you that in so many words? You dismissed him because you couldn't help it, — the natural thing to do. Now, you are convinced of the error of your ways, — that's natural, too! Then give the poor fellow a chance to correct his own error, if he has made one. It's your duty to yourself, to him. Write directly, and call him back! That's my advice, which you must follow."

"Even if he has offered himself to Alice Orbitt, and if she has accepted him?"

"Even so, my dear. One of two things must happen: either he will admit his mistake to her, — to you; or he will abide by his second choice, and you must accept the consequences. You would be no worse off then, than now; but it is you whom he really loves; in my opinion, whatever is happening while we sit here and talk, he will at once acknowledge that."

"But Alice, — it would make her miserable. She loves him, remember! There's no doubt, Aunt Lois; ah, if it weren't for that!"

"I know; I understand," returned Mrs. Canterbury, gently; "but poor, dear Alice, after all, is playing second fiddle, and she must be made aware of it, — the sooner, the better. You can't both have him, dear, don't you see? And you must just let Alice go.

The point is that you have changed your mind, that he has the right to be told, no matter what comes of it. I say again, write to him directly! Now, think this over as long as you like; then, *do* it! There, I 've said my say!"

So Mrs. Canterbury left Dorothy alone, with pious intent. "I shall say no more, come what will!" she concluded; and went about her household duties, curtly dismissing the subject. It would not down, however, but stood at the back of her mind, a grim shadow, persistently to haunt her. "Those two nice girls!" she thought, and sighed; for she was fond of them both, and, if Dorothy's assumption were well grounded, one of the two was bound to be unhappy. If only the child's notion about Alice were really what she, herself, had declared it to be, then all would come right; but —

When Dorothy reappeared in the little world of the oasis, there was a kind of glow about her, which seemed to show that the confidence had done her good. She was light-hearted and merry, outwardly, at all events. Mrs. Canterbury, taking the cue from her and asking no questions, became, outwardly, her counterpart; but her spirit was troubled within her; toward nightfall, doubts and misgivings went careering round in it, as she said, afterward. Was her advice sound, or unsound? Had Dorothy taken it already? If not, would she take it, or would n't she? Who should advise the adviser, and stop the inconclusive whirling in her tired, troubled, addled brain?

Dorothy, perhaps afflicted in a similar way, withdrew to her chamber early in the evening, after a demonstratively cheerful good-night. Mrs. Canterbury promptly followed her example; and, once in her own quarters, sought comfort there in loose attire; but this brought only physical relief. An hour or two later, Mr. Canterbury found her still up and wide awake, in mental commotion, pondering gloomily, with wrinkled brow.

"What on earth is the matter?" asked he.

Her face cleared with a sudden gleam of hope. She had not been sworn to secrecy, and Goff and she were one! His point of view might have some value, — she had not considered that. At any rate, it would ease her mind to tell; that was what she needed most to do. Without a word of warning she told him Dorothy's story.

It seemed, at first, to unbalance him; for he annotated her account with frequent exclamations.

"Well, well! Well!! Well!!!" he muttered, with ever-increasing emphasis. At the end, he drew a long breath, and remarked calmly, critically: —

"So, when she could have him, she did n't want him; but when some one else could get him, she decided that she had wanted him all along! If that is n't — "

"Now, Goff, you need n't tell me that it 's just like a woman. Of course it is! She could n't say she loved him until she knew, could she? She did what was entirely right and proper. Any woman with a conscience would have done the same."

"Exactly; I was only going to say—"

"Then don't waste time in saying it. What I want you to tell me is that you think my advice is justifiable. I am driven to distraction, and must know."

"I understand. Well, on the whole, I think you have mapped out the situation clearly; on the whole, wisely. She must give him his bearings now,—that's only fair,—and let him steer his own course."

Mrs. Canterbury drew a long breath, in her turn. "Ah! what a comfort it is to have a man's point of view! I almost think now that I can get this horrid, tangling business for a few minutes from my mind."

"That's decidedly the best thing to do. Why worry? You are cornering your horse, have driven him to water; let him drink; that's his affair. If there's mischief ahead, it won't be of your making."

"No, to be sure not."

"Then go to bed, and sleep, and forget him. Poor chap! he's a little like the donkey in the fable, between the two bundles of hay, uncertain which to choose, is n't he?"

"Now, Goff, he's not a donkey, whatever else he is!"

"Heaven forbid that I should call him by that name, or by any but the best! I liked him first because he had the good sense to learn his limitations; and now that I know him better, I like him more and more. He has courage, resolution, a broad mind. He will make a name we shall all be proud of,—I can see that; but, as to Dorothy,—I can't see that so clearly—"

"What do you mean, Goff? 'As to Dorothy'?"

"You have cornered her, too,—led her to the water, but are you sure that *she* will drink?"

"What in the world are you driving at?"

"Wait a bit! Where was Dorothy born? Do you remember?"

"Why, in New England,—in Campfield."

"Ah, that's it, Lois! You called her, just now, a woman with a conscience. Born in New England, she has inherited, perhaps, conscience in an exalted form. Most of us are made in that way,—few quite escape the infirmity."

"Well; what then?"

"Do you think that she has written yet the letter which you suggested?"

"Probably not,—yet. I expressly urged her to take time, and think it over."

"Precisely. If she is persuaded that Alice Orbitt and Staunton Ives are engaged to be married, over that letter she will have all kinds of qualms and compunctions. She will hesitate,—keep on hesitating."

Mrs. Canterbury smiled, and reflected for a moment; then declared emphatically:—

"Well, I shall make her do it,—that's all!"

"Very good," he returned. "Keep your eye upon her. I only wanted to warn you about that, and—"

"And if she doesn't," his wife broke in, "I'll write to him, myself!"

"On no account! That's my second warning,—the vital one. If you do that, she will discover and resent it,—throw him over, definitively. Beware of further interference! You have set the ball rolling; leave the rest to them; let them round it, finish it themselves, and make it a perfect sphere; or the whole celestial universe will go to pieces. Hands off! I warn you!"

Mrs. Canterbury laughed heartily. "You are a great artist, Goff!" said she; "it's as if you were making one of your globes with those sensitive hands of yours. I will take good care to do nothing of that sort, you may be certain. I have done all I can; except just one thing more, if it comes to that."

"And what is 'that'?"

"To seat her at the writing-table, stand over her and dictate the letter; then, hand her the pen, and wait till she has signed it!"

"I see!" laughed Mr. Canterbury: "to make her drink! No harm there, provided that she acknowledges it to be her free act and deed. Here's the clock striking twelve; let us go to bed, and sleep, now that we have settled the fate of nations."

Dorothy's visit was drawing to a close, and, as the days passed, Mrs. Canterbury, in the grasp of the fixed idea, watched her intently. Having formed a resolve not to torment her prematurely with inquiries or even remote hints, she adhered to it,—all the more, from a conviction that Dorothy, as soon as the momentous letter was written, would inform her of the fact. Meanwhile the subject dropped altogether; Dorothy continued uninterruptedly, provokingly cheerful; and Mrs. Canterbury was growing desperate.

The last day came and went. At its close, she could hold out no longer; now, at last, she must speak.

The weather had been bleak, autumnal, chilly, even for September's end; a storm had threatened all the afternoon, and about tea-time the rain began. Mrs. Canterbury stood at the window, looking out upon it, and shivered.

"Here's the equinoctial, at last! We need a fire. Nancy, light it, please, and bring in the tea, directly."

When this was done, when she and Dorothy, alone together, drew up gratefully to the first fire of the season, Mrs. Canterbury spoke again: —

"If this is really the equinoctial, it will pour all day to-morrow. You won't move over in such weather, dear, will you?"

"Oh, yes; why not? I must, you know. There is so much to do before Uncle John comes back, — and I've only three days left."

Mrs. Canterbury sipped her tea, hitched in her chair uneasily, finished the cup, set it down, and hitched again.

"Now, my dear, I want to ask you something; you'll forgive me, won't you? Have you written to Mr. Ives?"

Dorothy's face flushed, and a look of constraint came into it; but only for an instant; in the next, she looked up with a smile, and said: —

"Yes: that is, no; I have composed the letter, but it is not copied yet. I mean to do that to-night, and post it in the morning."

"I am very glad, dear. It must have been a hard letter to write, of course, and —"

"Yes, — I made it so, you see," replied Dorothy, quickly. "It need not have been hard at all, if I had only seen my way clearly, at first. I have reduced it now to the fewest possible words, — just a sign, that is all; but he will understand."

"To be sure, he will! One word would be almost enough. Dorothy, dear, I'm delighted!"

And, springing up impulsively, Mrs. Canterbury leaned over Dorothy's chair, and kissed her.

Dorothy made an affectionate response; they turned to other matters, leaving the important one settled, — very easily, as Mrs. Canterbury, hoodwinked by a half-truth, now believed.

The matter was by no means settled then; nor had a settlement been reached at the later hour when Dorothy, having gone to her room, was presumably engaged in making a fair copy of her letter; when Mrs. Canterbury, across the hall, whispered the good news to her husband, and received his congratulations upon her discreet handling of the difficult case.

The difficulty, plausibly indicated to the friendly counselor and accepted by her as an obstacle now overcome, was not wholly one of composition on Dorothy's part. Perplexities over the wording of the letter had, indeed, from time to time occurred, only to be cleared up by a reduction to the lowest terms, as honestly stated. But the underlying cause of delay, which Dorothy, still in the throes of irresolution, had thought it wise to withhold, was precisely that foreseen in Goff Canterbury's discerning study of her character,—namely, a grave, obstinately recurring scruple against writing any letter to Staunton Ives at all.

She had set him free; had scouted at his idea of a possible reconsideration. She had closed the door upon that, and shut him out alone, as it were, in an empty world. She realized now what satisfaction even then must have lurked in the thought that he stood there waiting,—ready to be recalled at any moment, if the spirit moved her. The world, however, was not empty, she had forgotten that; upon those silent spaces had intruded the figure of Alice Orbitt, sympathetic, kindly always,—kindlier far than she found herself to be. She had reckoned without Alice; and Alice had fallen in love with him,—of that, unhappily, her mind could admit no doubt. What wonder if he, becoming conscious of it, had, himself, reconsidered, preferring the well-disposed to the disdainful? Everybody had seen, had guessed the open secret, which she in her blindness was, of course, the last to know. What right had she, now, to interpose? None whatever. She had forfeited the right! True; but then she was his first choice. He had pledged himself without reserve to constancy. His words flamed out upon her from the darkness, as if written in letters of fire; they were indelible to her—to him. If they had conquered her at last, had he not, as she was told, the right to know? Yes; but there stood Alice, and Alice was her friend. That promise, outlawed by time, he might well consider canceled, and, so considering, perhaps he had already broken it; he could not be bound by it forever. To rise up and hold him to it now would be a wrong to Alice Orbitt. No; she could not interfere; it was too late. She must keep silence, let things take their course, and be forever miserable.

Thus she reasoned, ever in a circle; at the very moment of fancied resolution, with her letter of recall composed and waiting to be fairly written, letting the ink dry upon the pen, letting the pen fall.

It is ill arguing with a conscience; above all, with that rarefied, super-subtle essence of the inward monitor, — a New England one!

Locked in her room, that night, with the rising storm buffeting the window-panes, Dorothy once more got the worst of the argument. It was late, and she was tired; she would put off writing until the morning. Her mind would be clearer then.

It was, indeed, the equinoctial; increasing during the night, howling in the morning furiously, with blasts of wind and sheets of rain. Mrs. Canterbury, toasting her toes at the grate under the Copley portrait, waited for Dorothy to come down, and hoped that though the carriage was ordered she would countermand it. She might, at least, stay on until afternoon.

In due course, Dorothy appeared, dressed for her short journey across the town, with her small handbag upon her arm. Her trunk, upstairs, was packed and ready. Mrs. Canterbury saw that she was determined to go, made no attempt to dissuade her; but gave her a peculiar, penetrating look, which Dorothy could not ignore, and at once interpreted. Opening the little bag, she took out a sealed letter addressed to Staunton Ives.

Holding this up — " Do you see? " she said; " it is written! "

Mrs. Canterbury clasped her hands in delight. " Good! " she returned; " let me send Nancy out with it to the corner."

" In all this rain? On no account! There's a box at Uncle John's door, you know. I will post it there."

" Good! " cried Mrs. Canterbury again. " My dear, I can't tell you, — I am so thankful! "

Dorothy, smiling at her earnestness, dropped the letter back into the open bag.

" What poor an instrument
May do a noble deed! "

At that moment, Nancy opened the door and made a signal to her mistress.

" The butcher! " said Mrs. Canterbury, laughing. " I won't be gone two seconds!" And she followed Nancy out into the kitchen.

Left alone, Dorothy looked down at the bag, and was about to clasp it; but, rising with the opportunity unexpectedly granted, a wave of the old irresolution swept over her. She paused in the simple act, with her hand upon the clasp; hesitated an instant longer; then took out the letter, flung it into the flaming coals, and snapped the clasp triumphantly.

Mrs. Canterbury's seconds multiplied into minutes, though hardly more than five of them. When she came back, however, the carriage was at the door, the trunk strapped behind, and covered. There was nothing left for her to do but speed the parting guest.

"Well; it is done!" she cried, exultantly, with a final wave toward Dorothy, as the carriage rolled away.

While she spoke, behind her back, the last impalpable ashes of the soul-tormenting letter whirled up into the chimney-fumes.

XX

UNDER THE GINGKO TREE

CERTAIN hill-dwellers of that remote time still kept up the pleasant habit of an early morning walk around the Common in spring and autumn. The distance was called a mile and a quarter by the outer sidewalk which, together with the fence, then remained on all five sides; or just a mile, following the inner red-gravel pathway of the malls, — in either case, an excellent tonic appetizer.

Boston Common was a primitive breathing-place in those days; without monuments, other than its eagle-headed drinking-fountains, unhygienic and obsolete; without pavements, without asphalt. The protective wooden rails about the larger grass-plots were needlessly crude; the seats — oblong granite blocks, or unbacked benches sheathed with zinc — were hard, cold, comparatively few and far between, ill adapted to lounging, yet calmer, more inviting resting-places than those of to-day, for many immemorial trees, huge in girth, shading quiet spots unfrequented, have been replaced by newer growth; and the whole historic reservation had a refreshing detachment then which induced the contemplative to linger where only the idle loiterer — overmuch of him — now sprawls listlessly. Traffic had not then encroached upon its borders; transportation had not undermined it; the rattle and clang of thoroughfares, far off, was reduced to a vague, indefinite murmur. Now, awkwardly curtailed, defaced by decorative incongruities, it is still open to the air and light, and serves its present purpose of tramping-ground for the swarming multitudes that overrun it; but Time, the leveler, and Improvement, his working-mate, have obliterated lines long familiar, swept early associations, one by one, away. Hand in hand with these went fair proportion, symmetry well ordered, simple stateliness and natural dignity, — all assets of the "good old colony times" squandered, never to be regained.

The old, inestimable charm had not dissolved on that fine October morning when Humphrey Kelton came down the steps at the upper end of Park Street for his constitutional stroll. The sky was clear, a light breeze rustled in the branches overhead, before him ran a gentle scurry of fallen leaves. He took the Park Street Mall, walking briskly, breathing the fresh air with a glow of satisfaction. There were few stirring at that hour, and he rejoiced in the shining solitude; but, as he turned the Tremont Street corner, he saw, under one of the big elms near the gate, the blind dealer in cigars, a picturesque gray figure, setting his stall in order. Recognizing the step of a friendly customer, the man smiled and nodded. Kelton stopped a moment to bid him good morning, buy a superfluous box of matches and rattle small change down upon the glass counter. Then he went on along the wide lower mall, where the elm trunks in a triple row towered above him like cathedral pillars. Here the world was waking up, and he found more life and movement, yet still no one whom he knew; until, at the farther end, where he turned westward by the graveyard rails, the white-haired guardian of the peace, upon his morning round, alert, keen-eyed yet benignant, keeping order chiefly by his presence, greeted him cheerily as they met and passed.

Kelton, pausing to look after this dignitary, smiled at his trig, uniformed importance, his complacent, authoritative bearing. "The god of the playground, —" he thought; "serene in splendid isolation, his cares are few on this Elysian field."

On he walked, entering the long vista of the Charles Street Mall, where no one but an old apple-woman, crouching into place for the day, was yet in sight; pursuing his way to the very end of it entirely alone; and so began the last stage of his prescribed course, the most beautiful of the malls, — that easy incline following at a lower level the slope of Beacon Street, where the graceful American elms drooped their natural arches, as cleanly cut as if clipped into regularity. Near the top of the mall, a painter had planted his easel, and was hard at work. Kelton, coming up, stopped to inspect the choice of subject, the treatment thereof. The stranger welcomed him pleasantly, and, encouraged by an appreciative comment, as he worked, talked on.

He was sketching the level bit of the upper mall beyond him, with the Ticknor house and its distinguishing colonial portico in the background.

"Glad you think I can do it!" said he; "just a hint for my own advancement, not for the market. These things go before you know it. Look at the Hancock house! Luckily, I caught that; and now it's up the spout, demolished into dollars. This house has character, distinction, — quite enough to damn it; it's bound to go, too, in the wink of an eyelash, and who the devil cares? And that row of English elms, the finest trees in the place, — none finer anywhere! They'll neglect 'em, hack 'em down, uproot 'em, wipe 'em out; see if they don't! City Fathers! We have n't any, — we're orphans all of us! Brought up by hand, browbeaten by a pack of destroying angels! That's what *they* are!"

Kelton chuckled over this outburst of congenial bitterness. "So you have 'done' the Hancock house," he replied. "I should like to see how you have done it. May I?"

The painter whisked about, gave him a long searching look, then, with a shrug of the shoulders, resumed his work.

"I don't know why not," he drawled in answer; "but, mind you, it's not for sale. Come to my place, any day, after three. Number ten, Laurel Court, in the north light, at the back of the hill. Every one knows me there. Ask for 'Old Mortality,' — it's the name I go by. That will fetch me, if you lose your way."

Again Kelton chuckled. "Halt, friend, and give the countersign!" said he; "I'll remember it!" And, thanking this odd new acquaintance for the favor thus accorded, he passed on.

"'Old Mortality,'—in the north light!" he repeated. "There the laurel flourishes."

He had gone but a few yards when down the flight of steps on his left, just in advance of him, came a girl's figure, recognizable at once as Miss Alice Orbitt's. She did not see him, but turning up the mall, walked on ahead at a moderate gait,—evidently, like himself, out merely for a morning stroll.

Curiously enough, she happened to be the one person in all the town whom Kelton, at the moment, was rather disposed than otherwise to meet; yet so strong a hold upon him had his habit of reserve, that instinctively, at first, he slackened his pace; then, upon reflection, redoubled it and overtook her.

"The goodness of the morning to you!" he called out as he came up. "May I walk in it with you a little way?"

She had been deep in thought and started at the interruption, but hastened to return his greeting with a smile. "Welcome, kindred spirit!" she added, lightly; "the only one in sight! Time and place invite us all, and we have them to ourselves, you and I."

"So much the better! I have communed with myself alone here for many a day; and you are just back from the wilderness, I infer, to this perfected civilization."

"Just, only just! yesterday, in fact! We revive the town by our presence earlier than usual because of the Temple anniversary performances on Saturday; the thirtieth year of the theatre, you know,—the fortieth on the stage of Adam Jarvis."

"Ah, yes," said Kelton. "I have my tickets,—a Jarvis day and night: in the evening, 'The School for Scandal'; in the afternoon, 'A Cure for the Heartache.'"

"Ah!" returned Miss Orbitt; "that 's the play I have never seen and want to see,—'A Cure for the Heartache.' Is there one?"

She glanced up at him, laughing sportively; and Kelton answered, with a mocking smile:—

"Ask me an easier riddle, kindred sphinx. How should I know? Do you think that malady is one of mine?"

"No, indeed! I questioned only the philosopher, who should know all things in his wide experience; but you go twice in one day to the theatre? How does it happen? I fancied that you cared for it very little."

"So I do. This is a matter of duty. I care for old Adam, you see; moreover, he asks me to sup with him in Gibbon Place, that night, after the festival. I sit first at my host's feet for courtesy's sake, if for no other reason. Shall we walk back here in our unmolested spot,—ours, by right of conquest? We can't do better."

Miss Orbitt assenting, they turned at the Park

Street corner to retrace their steps on level ground. She looked up as they walked at the sturdy branches which, in fullest foliage, were still defiant of the autumn, and commented upon their vigorous beauty.

"There are no trees like English elms," she continued; "and these are giants, dwarfing all the rest. This poor, slim, Eastern stranger of a Gingko tree is out of place in such company."

"Ah!" said Kelton; "this is my well-graced landmark of the finest point. Sit here for a moment in my seat, and look back. You will agree with me."

Amused by his whimsical pretension of ownership, she took the seat as he desired; agreeing, while he sat beside her, in his admiration of the outlook, if not in his claim to prior discovery. The view was almost identical with that chosen for his sketch by the eccentric painter. Kelton, turning as he talked, glanced down the mall to point out to his companion this evidence of another kindred spirit in the neighborhood; but the man had gone.

Instead, he saw crossing the path below them, unconscious of their presence, another man, quite different in aspect. At the same moment Miss Orbitt turned and saw him, too. It was Staunton Ives, who passed rapidly before them thus at long range, on his way downtown.

"There goes a friend of ours," Kelton remarked. "See how he strides along. He has himself well in hand. Strong, powerful, — yes, that's the word. He makes me think of a line in Latin, — a line of Seneca: —

'Potentissimus est, qui se habet in potestate.'"

"Potentissimus est, —" repeated Miss Orbitt. "What is the rest? Translate it for me."

"All powerful is he who has power over himself," said Kelton. "That will do."

"Yes," she returned, thoughtfully. "That will do. It certainly suggests him well."

"I am not sure that I don't wish it did n't," mused Kelton, as if he were thinking aloud. "They are often over-obstinate, these strong fellows! They won't follow good advice." Then, in another tone, addressing her directly, he added: "Tell me! How does he get on?"

Startled by the unexpected question, Miss Orbitt recoiled, changed color slightly, and did not look up.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Get on? In what way?"

Kelton smiled. "'O, hardness to dissemble'!" he quoted. "Let us play with our cards upon the table. I know that you know, — do you see? Then why should n't we touch lightly upon the neutral ground, delicate, difficult though it be? I prescribed to my afflicted patient a cure for his heartache; but he doubted my skill, and did not obey orders. He doubted his own strength, too, — that 's a weakness in him. So it pleased him to submit his case to a higher authority, — wisely, perhaps; I am ready to be convinced of that. Meanwhile, where is the harm in a consultation of the doctors?"

He watched her as he spoke, noting her restless embarrassment, her still averted eyes. At his last word she laughed, with obvious effort. Then, after a moment of silence, she answered and, speaking, grew gradually more at ease.

"I throw down my hand," she said, simply and quietly. "It is true that your patient came to me, and that I temporized with him. He wanted a sign; I counseled delay, until I could make soundings, investigate, report results; but these proved to him unsatisfactory, inconclusive. My plan, in fact, failed miserably, — at first, only at first. For, all at once, in a most unexpected way, — a sad one, — the sign has been given to me. He does not know it yet, — no matter, he will know it. Through a painful, small misunderstanding, easy to set right, the sign is unmistakable, and all becomes now the merest question of time. I do not boast of my skill, I am not puffed up with pride about it; and yet I am moved to ask which is the better doctor, you or I?"

"That 's easily settled," rejoined Kelton, laughing. "If you have accomplished so much, I acknowledge your superiority at once. I might have remembered that delay always inspires hope, — a great philosopher said that, long ago. You are the nonpareil of doctors! Only, — about the rest of it, — are you sure?"

"Quite sure, — quite! And yet —" She hesitated; then drew from her pocket a letter.

"And yet?" urged he. "And yet you are so sure that you have written Ives the good news."

She glanced up at him for an instant, shook her head, looked away again and smiled.

"No, —" was her answer. "This letter is not for Mr. Ives. And yet—I was only going to say that I have not even earned my diploma. I deserve nothing less than your extravagant praise."

"I don't understand; explain, please!"

"The explanation is very simple. I am a doctor of inexperience. I overdid my work; I blundered horribly, was much too zealous. You know what the Frenchman said, 'Nothing is more distasteful than superfluous zeal.'"

"Yes, yes. What then?"

"Well, so it proved. Dorothy and I, you know, are old, intimate friends; but, of late, she has drawn away from me, avoided me, treated me with coldness, rudeness even. I could not understand, could hardly believe my eyes and ears. Then, at the fête, the other day, I watched her, studied her, and suddenly I understood everything. She was jealous of me, horribly jealous! There could be no mistake; here lay the cause, beyond a doubt. And from the cause, the sign! — wrung out of her, not through my skill, but through the lack of it; through my mistaken zeal, excess of sympathy. And, a day or two later, I came upon a rumor intimating — no matter what. I was troubled, distressed by it more than I can say; but all is cleared up now. I have written here, this morning, contradicting the report, — here in this letter. On her part, unconsciously, she has revealed the simple truth I half suspected. But, of course, I don't show that; I tell her only simple truth, on mine."

"I see; and, now, you will pass on your sign to him."

"The fact, not the why and wherefore. Reading my letter, Dorothy will come to her senses. Her misapprehension will vanish like a puff of smoke. A word will send him to her. Why, with him, should I quote chapter and verse? They are professional secrets. You are a doctor, and will not betray them. He need never know. She may tell him, afterward, of her jealousy, as a joke to laugh at and forget. Even then, they will not know I knew."

"We may dismiss the case, I think," replied Kelton; "it is out of our hands now."

Absorbed in talk, apart from the main current of wayfaring humanity, they had heeded little what went on around them. Now, an approaching footstep, light and alert, aroused them both. They looked up, as there came into the foreground the trim figure of an elderly man, short, slender, erect, and sprucely dressed. He drew near; his eyes turned toward them with a merry twinkle; with a smile of recognition he raised his hat and passed on, still holding his even, youthful pace.

Kelton, who had promptly returned the salutation, looked after him, smiling.

"The doctor salutes the doctors who have usurped his seat," he said. "This was his conquest, long before ours. Do you remember the gentle schoolmistress, the long path? It was the Autocrat himself. He is making his morning promenade, as he has made it often before, with insight, keen, infallible."

"Yet for all his keenness," said Miss Orbitt, "even he could have reached no better result than ours."

"No," agreed Kelton. "As I was saying, our case is dismissed. Life, the arch-physician, has relieved us of it. We might have trusted to his good offices." After a pause, once more as if he were thinking aloud, he continued: "Life! Life! Sooner or later, in one way or another, he cures all our heartaches; like with like, if it may be, according to the good old formula, — or, if assimilation fails, he hands us over to Time, his junior partner. It 's all one in the end." She made no comment, and, suddenly aware of her silence, half turning, he spoke again. "Perhaps that answers your enigma. In such skilled hands, no heartache is incurable."

"No," she answered; "none."

Something in her tone surprised him. He looked at her and saw tears rising in her eyes.

Instantly, however, she sprang up, laughing. "I must be off," she said, "and post my prescription. Thanks, so much, for granting me this conference. Good-morning!"

And, without waiting for a reply, she walked down the path, hurriedly, toward the steps by which she came.

Kelton, who had started up, dropped back upon the bench, looking first at her retreating form, then at the Autocrat's, which was still in sight.

"I wonder what he thought of us!" was his reflection. "Here, under his Gingko tree, like his own pair of early morning perambulators! But they were lovers; their conference was of a different order. He would shake his head, no doubt, and say that to confer is dangerous; that consultation induces consolation. I wonder, — What! By Hercules! Consolation, with a vengeance! I have hit it, I believe. By the infernal gods, I'll swear she cares for Ives, herself! And hence these tears! That's it. Oh, if the good Autocrat knew that, and all the rest! Like with like! Life has, this time, on his hands a strange, coincident case, indeed."

He rose, and walked homeward slowly, overwhelmed by circumstance, with brows knit, as if in the anguish of a problem; and, as he climbed the steps at the Park Street corner, he muttered: —

"Seneca, old man, you made a mistake in gender. 'Potentissima,' it ought to be!"

XXI

"AMORE FIDEQUE!"

FLORID, beaming, resplendent, Barnicoat Bradish, as the green curtain rolled slowly down upon the last scene of the "School for Scandal," stood in the first entrance on the O. P. side, sniffing at the fragrant white decoration in the buttonhole of his dress-coat and scrutinizing a small slip of paper in his plump right hand. According to custom, he had been supplied with this document early in the evening by the treasurer, and its combination of figures represented the cash receipts of the day's festival performances. So gratifying was their sum total, that he could not forbear repeated reference to it; now, reviewing it once more, he murmured tenderly, "Phenomenal!" and sighed for satisfaction. Then, as the players bore down on him to take their recalls, he hastily thrust the official bulletin into the waistcoat-pocket next his heart, and pressed forward the business of the scene.

The lesser lights came first: "Out, Sir Oliver! Out, Crabtree! Out, Sir Benjamin! Now, then, George! Now, Pauline!" And George Varick, the leading man, as Charles Surface, with Pauline Chase as Lady Teazle, passed, hand in hand, to meet the clamorous welcome of "the front." They, too, came and went. For a breathing-space, dramatically conceived, the "apron" before the curtain remained vacant, while the clamor uninterrupted redoubled in force. The comedy-lead, at last! "Go it, Adam, old man! Congratulations!" whispered the manager, slapping him on the shoulder affectionately. Serene, self-possessed, superb in his powdered hair and embroidered lavender-satin coat and small-clothes of the eighteenth century, Sir Peter whispered back, "Thanks, Barney!" stepped out, and was gone.

They recalled him again and again; the clamor turned into a tumult; as he retired, reappeared, cheer upon cheer broke out spontaneously. A voice shouted "All up!" and the house rose to him.

Meanwhile, Barney, the sagacious, flew back and forth behind, like a shuttlecock, preparing his master-stroke, not down in the programme. "On, on, all of you, for the finale! Quick, line up, there! Space it, space it, in a semicircle! A little to the left, George! That's good! Hold the picture!" He slipped out of sight, signaled; and behind Jarvis the curtain rose, revealing the company, grouped at parade-rest, in honor of its leader.

Jarvis retreated toward them, bowing to right and left, taking with an artist's accuracy the centre of the foreground. All at once, the house was deathly still. The moment came for him to speak. He had spoken, that day, once already, — in the afternoon, before the curtain; and, foreseeing that the public of the night would never let him off, had prepared a variant of the speech. He moved forward a step or two, and in a firm voice began upon it.

It proved to be the variant of a variant. Modestly referring to his long term of service, he admitted that the hour had struck when, according to Macbeth, that which should accompany old age might, in conformity with Nature's law, reasonably be his. Honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, — he had them all, except obedience, which he did not, could not exact. To obey was his, never to command. He remained the public servant ; to do his work well and strive to do it better must always be his engrossing thought, letting the credit for it take care of itself. That had come, indeed, in full, in overflowing measure, such as his wildest dream of youth dared not conceive. Interrupted here by uncontrollable applause leading on into prolonged shouts and cheers, emotion for an instant overcame him. Recognized, triumphant, he stood at that crowning point toward which all his fellow servants labored, which few attained. The lights swam before his eyes. Then he remembered the whispered caution of the French actress to her illustrious comrade, hovering upon the danger-line at the critical moment of a tragic scene: "Take care, Talma, you are moved ! " and, controlling himself at the thought, he thanked the friendly hosts before him for their generous appreciation, and hoped to die in battle-harness ; that, while he lived, they might not find him wanting. Suddenly he recalled the presence of the players on parade behind him. These, too, must be recognized; but for these he had prepared no word. Half turning, he addressed himself to them: "Ladies and gentlemen of the company, — for your support, your consideration, your friendship — " There, his voice faltered, broke; he could not go on, but bowed, with his hand upon his heart, smiling, mute, in agony; yet so gracefully unconscious was this expression of deep feeling that the plaintive incapacity for speech protested more than words.

Again the manager signaled. The orchestra took up the familiar, simple air of "Auld Lang Syne," and the company, joining hands, began to sing the words. Quickly, at their cue, the audience caught up the song; the chorus swelled out, before, behind the curtain, as it slowly fell upon Adam Jarvis, who stood with bowed head and tears streaming down his cheeks, stirred now beyond recovery. This was the wily Barney's last touch, to "consummate," according to his word, the festival. No shrewder man at his own game than Barney Bradish! — as all the world agreed.

The audience, impressed by its own share in these closing honors, moved out slowly, silently at first; then, rallying by degrees, began to commend all things in a clatter of conventional terms which soon resounded everywhere. Friend met friend, and the two exchanged with pleasurable gasps and sighs the same current coinage of admiration which every other two commanded. "Beautiful!" "Ideal!" "A splendid performance!" "The finest possible!" "A perfect thing!" "So pathetic, my dear!" "And touching!" "Not a dry eye in the house!" — and so on, until it seemed as if every approving superlative in the language (excepting only "phenomenal," which was Barney's own) had recurred a hundred times; the truth being that we have but a limited vocabulary available for such moments, when the impromptu exclamation of delight goes trippingly from the tongue.

Staunton Ives, having a small part to play in what was still to come before the triumphs of the night were over, had gone alone to the theatre, and now from his obscure seat in the background, easily slipped away in advance of the crowd. He repaired to the manager's office, where Barney, flushed with achievement and genial to excess, awaited him. "A great night, my boy, — great night! Look at our receipts!" Once more he produced his bulletin over which Ives was properly astounded. Then, after locking the door, Mr. Bradish adjusted the combination of his safe and drew therefrom a rosewood case. "There's the thing! Catch hold of it; it's in your charge."

The thing was a large loving-cup in silver, the gift to Adam Jarvis from a group of subscribers made up of personal friends, — that distinct inner circle intervening between the actor and the indefinable circumference of his friendly public, — among whom Ives had served as working member upon its committee. The cup had been entrusted to him for unceremonious presentation at the supper in Gibbon Place, whither he and Barnicoat Bradish were tending. He uncovered it now, and approved, as he had done before, the simple design, harmonious ornament, and happily worded inscription of this memorial, — for all of which he, himself, had been in some degree responsible. Barney, meanwhile, had opened his office window an inch or two, and, watching unperceived beyond it the chattering crowd sweep along the corridor toward the street, made whispered comments to his companion within upon its numbers and its quality. "After all, my boy, quality 's what tells!"

There came a light tap at the door; and Mr. Bradish turned the key, admitting Mr. Richard Ballister, — the great Chilworth, — in his jauntiest air and mood. He tossed down the remnant of a cigarette and stamped upon it.

"Well, Barney!" he exclaimed. "Scooped 'em all, did n't you?"

"I believe you, Chilly, my precious! To the tune of seven thou!"

"No! You don't mean it!"

"Every numeral! And the quality —"

"You 're right, there! I 've got 'em on my list, every damned one of 'em, and it 's longer than the moral law. All the names worth setting up in this blasted, high-strung town, you may say!"

Barney inflated himself with pride, almost to bursting. "Yes, Dick," he agreed. "It 's a great night for the good old Temple."

Mr. Ballister sighed. "And the devil's own night to write up. Lucky to-morrow 's Sunday! Come, let 's get a move on for the banquet! The gang 's about gone by. What 's that? The tribute?"

"Aye, aye, sir! All ready; but we don't go that way. Our carriage waits, my lord, at the other portal. Forward, march; and follow me!"

He flung open the opposite door and stepped out, with Chilworth at his heels. Ives, catching up his burden, pushed on behind them into the vast, vacant blackness of the musty stage. The curtain was drawn up; one jet flared at the footlights; beyond it, shadowy attendants unrolled and launched out shroud-like mufflers over stalls and galleries. Specks of light glimmered high overhead. Under them they crossed, and turned up the stage incline to a winding staircase at the back which led through depths below to the stage-door. There two carriages were waiting. They plunged into one of these, and lighted their cigars as it drove off.

"Adam not ready yet, I suppose?" suggested Ballister.

"No; he comes later," Barney explained, "with Varick and Mackenzie. We lead because of the tribute, holding it for the dramatic moment. Adam has not caught on, so far as we know."

In five minutes they drew up in Gibbon Place, where it seemed as if Miss Colt must have had an ear at the keyhole; for the door opened instantly.

"Glad to see you all, God bless you!" she chirruped blithely. "Come in, Mr. Ives, out of the cold! Good-evening, Dick! Mr. Bradish, sir to you! Leave your things right here, and walk into my banquet-hall.

We've moved up one to-night. Supper in the old kitchen, cooking in the laundry! And how do you like it, eh?"

"Whew!" whistled Dick Ballister, pausing with Ives upon the threshold for a rapturous view of the preparations. Bradish, crossing to the fireplace, rattled its iron crane and pot-hooks, as if to assure himself that they were practicable; then, wheeling upon the hearth, inspected the scene with one of his comprehensive "ringing-up" glances.

"Spick and span! Swept and garnished!" declared he; "I could n't have set it better at the Temple."

The wide, well-proportioned room was, indeed, immaculate at every point, from the painted red-brick floor to the freshly whitened ceiling and its varnished beams. Walls, woodwork, and metal shone; platters, glasses, and utensils of every sort glistened upon the shelves, festooned with laurel. A laurel garland lay in the middle of the white cloth upon the supper-table, and at its head, in a tall glass, stood one red rose.

"Eight places, eh?" continued Bradish, moving forward and adjusting his eye-glasses to read the names upon the plates. "Where 's yours, Kitty?"

"Oh, bless your heart, it 's a man's supper!" she returned, with a merry stage-laugh. "I 'm your pretty waiter-girl!"

"And dressed for the part, upon my word!" he laughed. "Most becoming toggery, too! My compliments!"

Blushing and tittering coquettishly, she twirled about at the end of the room, the better to display her remarkable attire, at which Ives had silently wondered. It was obviously a stage-dress in some nondescript old-comedy period, comprising high-heeled shoes, a flowered overskirt, with cherry-colored petticoat and fluttering ribbons of the same brilliant hue.

"I thought you 'd like me," she admitted. "Don't say you don't remember it! Sophia, second dress, 'Road to Ruin,' you know. I put it on for Mr. Ives's benefit. He understands. He shall have his soubrette, if not his leading lady."

At this, Ives, setting down his rosewood case upon the table, stepped out gallantly, as if he were dancing a minuet, and made her a profound bow of appreciation. She sank back in graceful, dignified response, to the applause of the others.

"What's that in the box, Mr. Ives?" she cried, dropping the pose, abruptly. "Oh, Mr. Jarvis's cup, of course. Quick! let me hide it, — here, in the oven. There!" she added, closing the door upon that cavernous receptacle; "I 've got the champagne for it all ready; but you 'll drink only beer, mind you, till then. Hush! They 're coming."

It was only Goff Canterbury who sidled in, wincing a little at confronting the state splendors of Chilworth and the manager, greeting Ives the more cordially because, like himself, he did not wear a swallowtail. A moment later, Humphrey Kelton followed him.

"Another plain-clothes man!" said Mr. Bradish, facetiously; "we shall be in a glorious minority, Dick, with our war-paint on. P'r'aps we should apologize."

"On no account, Mr. Manager," chaffed Kelton, in return. "The dignity of the arts must be maintained. Keep your end up! We'll try to do the same by ours."

And turning to Miss Colt, he complimented her upon the decorations of the room and those of her own person, which with rare discernment he perceived at once to be extraordinary. Touched by these courtesies, she grew in radiance, vowing that he was a man of taste and that few enough of 'em were left nowadays.

Presently, properly informal as to dress and manner the three actors came in rollicking, and the party was complete. Adam Jarvis, showing no trace of fatigue after his hard day's work, the most genial of hosts, directed them to their places. "George, here at my right! That's it, Mr. Bradish, the other end; you have Sir Oliver — Mac, I mean — to right of you; Goff, to left of you; Mr. Ives next him, there in the middle, with Dick for opposite; Mr. Kelton, here, on my heart-side!" He bent low over the fragrant rose, flashed pleasantly at Ives a momentary side-glance, and seated himself at the head of the table. "Now then, Kitty, we're off! With nothing to the good but a couple of sandwiches between make-ups, I'm ready, for one!"

"You never left the theatre, then," said Kelton, in an aside to him, while Miss Colt and her maid brought in the oysters, and the others talked among themselves.

"Not I; too much on my mind, — and it gave way, after all. I brought my hand to the heart-line, and ran dry."

"The heart-line!" Kelton repeated; "that 's a new phrase to me."

"Ah? Where do *you* draw the line, then, may I ask?"

"I don't!" laughed Kelton. "It takes care of itself."

"What 's that?" broke in Dick Ballister, catching the last clause. "Nothing takes care of itself in this world. We have to 'push on — keep moving,' — as George said in the play, this afternoon."

"Good point, too!" declared Mr. Varick, absorbing his last oyster. "Can't be made too often, — always gets there."

"Oh, the parts are good enough," conceded the critical authority, "but it 's rare old stuff-and-nonsense, that 'Cure for the Heartache' — ought to have been shelved long ago."

"I hope it will live as long as I do," Jarvis retorted; "for my part is light, as well as good, — a rest to the soul that is weary: don't kill it yet, Dick; it 's a merry piece to play in of an afternoon, with one immortal line which all the world misquotes."

"'Praise from Sir Hubert,' you mean," confidently noted Mr. Ballister.

Jarvis chuckled. "There you go again!" said he. "Give him your line, George, as Morton wrote it."

"'Approbation from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed,' " corrected Varick, not displeased to set the great Chilworth down, if only by a hair's breadth.

Dick did not turn a hair, however. "Well," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "that fustian is hardly worth remembering. It's as bad as poor old Bulwer's trash about the lexicon of youth, which everybody gives us as the 'bright' lexicon. I heard it spouted that way in the Senate only the other day by a great panjandrum, and never should have known the difference, if I hadn't played François once myself, to Booth's Richelieu. François! There's a 'bit' part that gets over, if you know how to work it. Now I — "

"Poor old Bulwer!" murmured Adam Jarvis, with a wink to whom it might concern.

But Dick failed to notice it, launched as he was upon a flood of recollection for tolerant listeners at the other end of the table. Unwittingly he set the ball rolling; and, through several substantial courses, personal reminiscence became the order of the night. When Dick faltered, Mackenzie, the first old man, had an anecdote about himself that reminded the affable manager of something not irrelevant. Kelton, by a chance question, had stirred up Jarvis, and the two talked apart; while Ives, in the same way, learned from Varick of bygone days when he "had held a spear," as he said, patiently for six long months among the supers, never uttering a syllable. Climbing the heights slowly and painfully, he had gained in public favor, but had lost in patience; for he was now the chronic growler of the company whom nothing ever completely satisfied; yet his growls were terse as well as pungent, and Ives found them amusing.

Meanwhile, Miss Colt, darting around the table, served them well; under her ministrations they expanded, and the talk, in which she, herself, took occasional part, became general. Then the host told a comic story and another, which all applauded; and "Mac," who had a voice, called up, gave the song of Sir Harry Bumper in the "School for Scandal" better than the Bumper of the cast had given it. "He 's a poor thing, you know," Varick muttered. All joined in the chorus. During its second round, Ives, leaning back, overheard a sharp click behind him. He turned, and saw that Miss Colt had unlatched the door into the front room.

"You won't mind the draught, I hope," she whispered. "It 's only the leading lady, come in with Lois to hear the speeches. I 'll bring coffee and tobacco,—then the cup."

"The cup, to be sure!" said Ives, finding it entirely natural that Miss Pauline Chase should hover in the background for that ceremonial moment. He was to read the subscribers' letter of presentation, and, drawing the paper from his pocket, studied it furtively while the song went on.

Coffee was set down; cigars were passed; the men shifted their positions, leaning upon the table or tilting away from it in an afterglow of ease. Miss Colt, as cup-bearer, unperceived by the host, stole in to stand behind his chair. Then, at Kelton's signal, Ives rose and read the letter, which set forth briefly the joy of the undersigned in contributing to this token of respect and admiration for the triumphant art of Adam Jarvis, — with the hope that he and the fine traditions he represented might long survive to the glory of the Temple and the town. At the last word the bearer, tearful-eyed, placed the brimming cup upon the table before the veteran, who had listened, motionless, in grave perplexity; but, now, upon this tangible conclusion all became clear. He leaned forward, read the words inscribed in his honor, his own name, and rose with the cup in his hands. Tears came into his eyes, but he laughed them off. "'I had not thought to shed a tear in all my miseries,'" he declared; "the crocodile is famous for them, I am told, but I won't swear to it; I will only swear that mine are not of the crocodile." So, recovering himself, he went on merrily with one apt word after another for all present, the givers and the gift, his fellow players, the management, the press, the public. Then, lifting the cup, he drank "'to the general joy of the whole table,' — and to our next victim!" — passing, as he spoke, word and cup together on to Kelton, while he resumed his seat with hands raised in protest to ward off the applause.

Kelton faced the music with a health for Jarvis and concise, good-natured banter for them all; firing and falling back in his turn, he left the field to the great Chilworth whose small-arms evidently were primed and ready. So the cup went round, and the toast passed till all had responded to it; some, wittily; one, at least, floridly, — for to the effort of Barnicoat Bradish his own word "phenomenal," now reiterated, alone could do justice;—none, haltingly. Even Goff Canterbury waxed eloquent, soaring among the spheres and descending to mundane things in a rapid rush so laughable that George, the growler, was startled into admiration of him. "Jolly old duffer! Who'd have thought it?" he whispered, as the shouts went up. Recognizing a rare opportunity, he made his own discourse a series of rapier-thrusts at the foibles of the management, received by Mr. Bradish with fatuous condescension, by his comrades with subdued rapture. The cup started again on a tour of inspection and approval, growing ever lighter in its course from hand to hand.

At last, Dick Ballister sprang up. "'Time gallops withal'!" said he; "I hear his hoof-beats,—yes, and feel them, too!" He made his formal adieux, and was off, taking Bradish and the two players with him. Ives prepared to follow; but Miss Colt, protesting, intervened.

"Mr. Kelton is not going just yet," she noted, persuasively. "Stay a little longer, do! And will you be so kind as to bring me my shawl from the front room?"

He opened the door, and stepped in over the threshold. The gas was not lighted; but a gleam from the street-lamp revealed a woman's figure standing there near the window. The actress, of course! he remembered that she had come in for the speeches.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, and took another forward step, but started back. It was not the Lady Teazle of the company; it was Dorothy Ashley, — his own leading lady, according to Miss Colt's playful word.

"What! You, here! In the dark?" said he.

"Why not?" was the gentle answer. "When you have waited in the dark so long."

He started forward, but again drew back. There were voices in the hall; its door opened, lighting up the room, bringing Miss Colt and Mrs. Canterbury in together.

"It is time for me to go home, Aunt Lois," said Miss Ashley, with the utmost composure; "and I am taking Mr. Ives home, too. The carriage is at the door."

"So it is, my dear; good-night to you!" returned Mrs. Canterbury, with an affectionate embrace. Ives, half dazed, catching up his coat and hat, followed Miss Ashley to the carriage. As he stepped in behind her, Miss Colt ran after him.

"You forgot the shawl," she chuckled, over his shoulder. "No matter!"

He had forgotten also to take leave of his host, the beneficiary of the night, and never thought of that until the next day, — as Adam Jarvis often afterward reminded him. The oversight became a standing joke between them.

"Do you think they could have known?" said Dorothy, as they were driven off.

"How should they? I hardly know, myself! Why are we driving on at this fearful rate? Let us walk together up the hill! Shall you mind?"

"Up the hill, over it, and beyond!" she laughed; "at whatever pace you please!"

They dismissed the carriage at the next corner, and began their long walk, climbing slowly under the stars.

A little later, Kelton, lingering in the old kitchen, rose to go, and noticed for the first time that Ives was no longer there. Characteristically, though he had counted on his fellow lodger's companionship, he made no remark; naturally enough, perhaps, Ives, ready to go himself but not wishing to hurry him, had quietly slipped away with the others.

As he took the hill at a moderate pace, his wandering thought became fixed at last upon his favorite Latin poet. He was alone in the street; and he amused himself by recalling a passage, lately learned by heart, near the close of the "Tristia": —

> "Morte nihil opus est pro me, sed amore fideque,"

he recited; then stopped short, suddenly aware that he was overtaking two wavering shapes on foot, — indeed, was almost at their heels.

In another moment he had recognized them with amazement.

"Amore fideque," he repeated. "By the stars above us, behold here of love and faith a radiant example!"

Then, needlessly cautious, comfortably out of hearing, he followed on behind a few steps farther, to the top of the hill. There, at the corner he stood still and watched them cross the dim street slowly, arm in arm, to descend into the Common by the Park Street steps. When they were gone, he wheeled about and went his own way, laughing and sighing.

Alone in his rooms, he paced the floor awhile, reflecting upon his nocturnal adventure in a mingled mood, half merry and half mournful.

"The currents of the heart are restless, deep, inscrutable," he murmured. "What folly! The long agony, self-imposed, forgotten in a moment at the swift, predeterminate conclusion! 'Amore fideque'! I wish them joy of the cure, while it lasts. What a pity that happy human life is not eternal!"

Turning to his cabinet of curios, he found the lacquered box stowed away in its recesses, and drew out the likeness there concealed, intent upon destroying it; but, with a new impulse of that perplexing human heart whose instability he deprecated, he dropped the frail memento back into its hiding-place.

"Let it lie there, — well out of harm's way now!" said he.

THE END

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